I Reincarnated as a Noble Girl Villainess But Why Did It Turn Out This Way?

– Akuyaku Tensei Dakedo Doushite Kou Natta –

- Act 2 -

Assemblage

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– Synopsis –

Eliza Kaldia, who reincarnated as a noble girl villainess in a fantasy otome game, was stuck in a world that seemed far from her image of how noble girls should be living, as the fated events of the game were still far off while she remained a child. In the first place, it was suspected if she could even live to make it to the school setting of the game. Due to changes in the situation of the neighboring country which never appeared in the original game, the world became nothing like the flowery school life from the game. It was a world where even young girls had to take up weapons. How did it turn out this way…

I don't have any cheat-like abilities. I can't use magic. Though, my sense of ethics might have become a little twisted due to being reincarnated.

Parmigram Dukedom

Giograd Dukedom

Molton Domain?

Marquis Nordsturm's Northern faction

Fushobari Region

Amon Nor

Ex-Artolas (now Densel)

Bandishia Plateau

Densel Dukedom

Ugaria Region

Artsbelf Region

Jugfena Region

Jugfena Royal Domain

Kaldia Domain

?

Stadel Domain

Royal Capital

Monster Forest

Rindarl Union

Amon Albus

Henznaut Domain

Genas Domain? (Ex-Galbaito)

Rogshia Domain?

Genas Domain

Planates Dukedom

Arxia Kingdom

Greenfield Region

Freche Domain

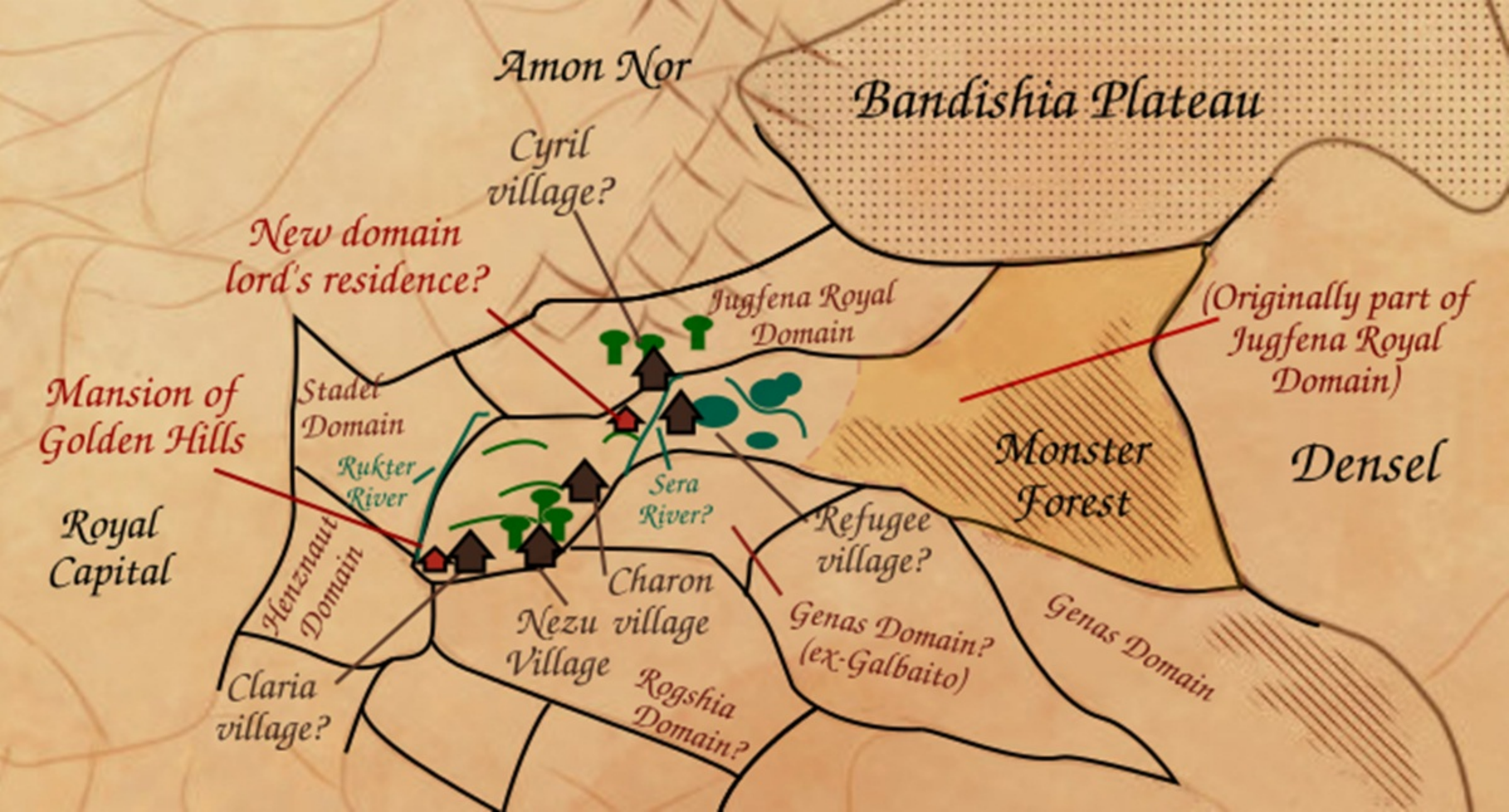
Freche Region

Ruktoferd Domain

Amon Karan

Various Lesser Countries

Pactoshiki?


Amon Nor
Bandishia Plateau
Cyril village?
New domain lord's residence?
Jugfena Royal Domain
(Originally part of Jugfena Royal Domain)
Mansion of Golden Hills
Stadel Domain
Rukter River
Sera River?
Monster Forest
Densel
Royal Capital
Henznaut Domain
Refugee village?
Charon Nezu village
Nezu Village
Genas Domain? (ex-Galbaito)
Genas Domain
Claria village?
Rogshia Domain?

【 PART I 】

Chapter 70
Two viewpoints

(This chapter returns to Eliza's point of view.)

I believe that games, books, manga, anime, TV shows, movies, all these things created solely for entertainment purposes are basically so that we can obtain some sort of catharsis. As an example, in my previous life, due to my younger sister's recommendation, I tried a certain otome game.

Helping other people from the heroine's perspective, improving your character by raising your level and stats, and enjoying the drama between the characters.

You can romance handsome, high-spec boys, or even, during that process defeat your love rivals.

With it, you obtain a sense of superiority and satisfaction.

In a medieval European fantasy setting, made of fluffy images, the heroine is able to meet male capture targets filled with various female ideals, although this was all very lacking in realism. Once again, this must purely be for entertainment purposes, as the characters' archetypes were rather exaggerated and very shallow.

The otome game was quite detailed, and it felt deeper than most stories. Just like the original meaning of the word catharsis, it might have been intended to purify the emotions of pity and fear through art.

However, all I know is that it wasn't the case for me.

The heroine was someone that had come from the neighboring country, to go to noble school and look for a husband candidate from among the students, and she would romance them, that was the story.

It didn't depict anything about the brutality and filthiness of human beings, there was nothing in it obstructing people from obtaining catharsis.

I looked around at the earth which was stained with blood. Dead bodies which were unrecognizable, were piled up like garbage.

Military forces between countries had fought here. Humans had caused so much death and destruction.

Why had they fought, why were so many lives sacrificed, the dead would obtain nothing.

There was nothing such as celebration wine to be seen around here.

This was another side to the game world where the heroine was the neighboring country's archduke's daughter and had come to noble school to have fun and find romance. This type of scene had never appeared in the game, yet there were indeed pools of blood everywhere.

There's no such reason like people attempting to obtain catharsis here, there was only people killing each other, and dying. Or, there's no story-like qualities here, only people fighting with all their strength.

People aren't very principled, it's a world where people attack others based on their feelings and desires.

Even though I know that, still, this world is nothing like the game settings at all, only the stage is the same while a war began, I got the ridiculous idea wondering if this was reality at all.

I was simply scared.

Is this world real or fake? Am I just dreaming?

Indeed, my feelings of memories of a past life were fading.

Why did I kill people for, I wonder. Why do people die, I wonder.

Are people's deaths meaningless, I wonder.

I wonder if I would have been happier had I not recalled my past life's memories. If I didn't know the game's story from my past life's memories, would this war have not started, I wonder.

Even if I think about it, I have no answers. That's all I understand.

I just keep telling myself that it's probably for the best that I don't understand anything.

Is this world just a game world from my previous life, I wonder.

Or, is this reality with breathing, living people, I wonder.

I can't decide if this is reality or not, even though technically this isn't supposed to be something that I can just leave undecided.

That's why, maybe I have no choice but to accept, that I can't make a choice between the two.

Chapter 71
Rite of passage

In any society, it seems that there's various different rites of passage.

I'm at the head temple of the Ar Xia church, the Great Shrine of Misorua, which basically surrounds the royal palace here in the royal capital. I've been kneeling in the dark for some time, thinking about various things instead of the confession I'm supposed to be doing.

In the Arxia Kingdom, this is a rite of passage for seven year olds, a turning point in one's life. This is also the age at which one can be punished for one's own crimes under the law. Meaning, I'm supposed to make an oath to follow the laws of Xia for the rest of my life, and I shall take the responsibility for being punished in accordance with the law if I break any laws.

While commoner children can just go to wherever the closest church is and listen to a recitation of the contents of the Sacred Code, it's different for nobles.

I had to schedule a date beforehand with the Great Shrine of Misorua for the ritual, and perform a purification ceremony by myself in a dark room by confessing for half a day. After that, I have to recite a passage from the Sacred Code, and swear to protect and uphold the law in front of the god Misorua and the priests.

At the same time, this ritual is also meant to formally induct me as a member of the Ar Xia church.

Before seven, I'm only considered an interim member. Well, there's a very high proportion of children that die before reaching seven, and children aren't considered to know right from wrong here until they're seven years old.

Thanks to various detailed memories from my previous life, I felt like everything religion related seemed really shady, and I didn't believe in it at all. Spending half a day shut inside a dark room, I found this confession thing to be rather ridiculous, and I merely remained here in silence.

Whether or not the god Misorua exists, I don't care either way at all. Even if I belong to the Ar Xia church, whether or not I really believe in what they preach isn't important at all. What's important is keeping up appearances and going along with society.

Six months ago, when I kept sleeping constantly for an entire month, I kept dreaming about things from my previous life.

I recalled many things that I had once forgotten. But, rather than feeling like it was something that happened to myself in the past, it felt more like I was reading a book with someone else as the protagonist, or maybe a ghost whispering information to me.

I'm currently Eliza Kaldia from the Arxia Kingdom, not a young girl that used to live in Japan.

In the darkness, although I took a pious pose of reflecting on my past sins, I mostly spent the time saying my farewells to and making a break from my past life.

After the time allotted for confession finally finished, I looked around the main hall of the Great Shrine for a while. My guardian, Earl Terejia had come along with me to the Great Shrine, but he has his uses.

We're finally supposed to be able to invite a bishop that can hold church rituals to my domain. To keep track of the bishop's movements, for the necessary paperwork, and the conditions that would need to be agreed on, this is where the earl comes in. By the way, although the term bishop reminded me of high-ranking clergymen from my past life, here in Arxia it just refers to a much more general educator. Bishops are responsible for teaching reading and writing.

A priest guided me into the shrine's main hall. When I entered, I was struck by the extravagance and magnificence of what was before me. There were exquisite stone sculptures of unrivaled craftsmanship on wooden pedestals and there was also two fountains of flowing water by the main platform. The ceiling had large panes of stained glass in flower shapes, giving the inside of the church an amazing array of colors.

On top of the a main platform was an altar to honor the remains of St. Ahar, and even more surprisingly there was a spring coming from it. The water flowing from it was enclosed by a circle of stones, and a coffin was placed in the center.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it.”

The priest guiding me seemed to be quite proud of it all. I could only nod in agreement. Seeing such beautiful construction, I haven’t ever seen anything like this even in my previous life.

I finally looked away from all the splendor, and started focusing on the priests here. The priest next to me watched me in silence. It feels like he might watch me like this for quite a while, to the point of boredom.

Then, as I looked around at the fine details of the craftsmanship on the ceiling and floor, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Oh my, aren’t you…… the Kaldia girl?”

It was a voice that sounded neither young nor old, neither male or female, a very mysterious voice. It sounded familiar. When I turned around, it was a person dressed in white priestly garments.

“Priest Faris-!”

“It seems that you’re about to swear your oath. Although, you have quite a terrible expression for someone going through their purification ceremony and confession……”

This is the priest that presided over my birthday celebration last spring, Faris had an ambiguous smile. Although I haven’t seen Faris in over a year, there’s no change in Faris’s appearance, and my cheek involuntarily twitched at this priest’s appearance.

“……Well, I guess it’s because you have to shoulder such a terrible burden when you’re still so young.”

Is something funny about all this, that you’re making snarky comments, and don’t touch my shoulder like that without permission.

This enigmatic priest, I can't tell what he or she is thinking at all, yet somehow Faris always seems like he or she can see straight into my heart, I felt extremely unsettled.

"Head Priest-sama, please don't tease Viscountess Kaldia so much……"

The priest guiding me remonstrated Faris. Priest Faris shrugged lightly, and headed for the altar.

Chapter 72
Child's game

When I finally woke up last year in autumn after a full month of sleeping, I had a lot of work to catch up on even though I was still recovering. Now that six months have passed since then, things have finally settled down.

Also, because of the battle at Fort Jugfena and me being asleep an entire month, the refugee acceptance plan has gone way off track. Originally, starting in summer, we were supposed to start by accepting 50 refugees in the first month. In the end, we were supposed to receive around 1200 new citizens, but because most of the refugees at Fort Jugfena had been killed, in the end Kaldia is only going to gain about 300 new citizens from the refugees.

Also, as for the Shiru tribe, they were much more in number than what I had assumed. At first I had heard that there would be about 40 of them, but even if there were three times that number, with 120 of them, integration should still be reasonably achievable.

However, in the end there had still been 300 of them hiding in the Bandishia Plateau that ended up joining me, a much larger number than expected. It's quite impressive that so many of them were able to shake off such a large pursuing Densel force for over a month.

Together, it's 600 new citizens, but it's still only half the original number of new citizens that were supposed to have joined. They were supposed to help in constructing the new village as well, but with this I'm going to have to redo my plans from scratch.

After all, half of them are the Shiru tribe, who are nomadic, meaning they roam often and don't stay in one location for very long, so they have very little knowledge in construction. And on top of that, they're also not very well versed in agriculture and farming.

Having come west of the Bandishia Plateau to Kaldia, they're going to have to adjust their lifestyles and construct homes for themselves. Usually it seems that they

construct homes from the earth and stone rather than wood. Unfortunately, stone as a building material in Kaldia…… is almost nonexistent.

Since I don't have the time or money, for now all I can do is supply wood as building materials. Also, I'm having clay prepared, to be made into bricks.

Although I also hope to attract people to immigrate to my domain, it's only a slight hope, first I still have to work my way through this current problem.

What's more, because the person in charge of overseeing the village construction was Kamil who passed away, there's the issue of who to put in charge from now on. Finding someone from here that knows how to speak the Artolan language, so that mutual understanding can be easily achieved for everyone to work together, seems very difficult to do.

There had also been 30 soldiers originally helping with the village construction, but 20 had been recalled to go to Fort Jugfena's battle and there were only 10 working there still. Although I had mentally prepared myself that this may happen, due to the casualties suffered in that battle, now we no longer have enough surplus troops to send soldiers to help aid the construction again.

In the end, I decided to move the village construction farther west, much closer to the area under my direct control in the Kaldia domain. It's become that things are now moving ahead of schedule.

Also, just because I was asleep for a month doesn't mean that there was no paperwork to be done during that time, after the battle I had to repeatedly go back and forth between Kaldia and the royal capital, with no time to rest because too much work had piled up.

– The above just took me about thirty minutes to explain to Ratoka who was glaring at me. Finally, he spoke up with a sulk.

"So, you're saying you were so busy that you completely forgot about me."

His voice, while calm, definitely sounded angry and cold. I feel like it might almost be better if he were screaming and yelling at me instead.

"No, it's just that I had a lot of work to finish before I could meet up with you, that's what I just explained."

“Is that something you say to someone you’ve barely talked to and left alone for almost a year?”

While I haven’t talked to him much lately, his education has still been continuing, so his words have gotten more eloquent. His red eyes and even gestures are so similar to mine, it’s definitely caught my interest.

“……Even if you say I left you alone, I don’t have a use for you right now.”

When those words left my mouth, a vein started bulging on his forehead.

“Or maybe, could it be, you wanted attention from me even though I’m younger?”

“Do you want to get beaten up!!”

“Whoops, be careful not to let disrespectful words slip out there.”

As I watched Ratoka, also known as “Elise,” I couldn’t help but let out a laugh at his face turning red in anger and frustration. Being snarky towards him as a form of stress release, why did I develop this kind of habit, I wonder.

I dodged his fist that was aimed at my shoulder, and I felt a nostalgic feeling like I was in the barracks, exchanging banter with the soldiers.

Chapter 73
A doll and a secret letter

"……What exactly is this?"

Maybe because I had been so stupefied, those words accidentally slipped out. I had just heard something so unexpected, that I just kept staring at Earl Terejia in a daze.

"You'll have to play together with Elise-dono."

Earl Terejia's calm voice crushed my feelings of wanting to escape. Once again, I took a good look at what was in my hand.

It was an elaborate, beautifully made girl doll, but it was creepily deformed by an indescribable smile on it.

I wondered just how much gold it would take to make those golden clothes the doll was wearing in real life size, as I admired the excessiveness of the doll's extravagant clothing. After all, the amount of frilliness on it was dreadful to behold.

This doll in my hand was a gift from the father of the noble girl currently staying here at my mansion, Elise's father Baron Sherstok. The baron had even went to the trouble of gifting me a set of two dolls with different designs. This was the meaning behind Earl Terejia's words just earlier, "you'll have to play together with Elise-dono."

Although Elise had come over to Kaldia in order to recuperate from her illness, in name she was also my guest and playmate. But up until now, we've never really played, and only visited each other. While Elise is indeed a bit sickly, it's more of that I've simply been so busy that I haven't been able to spare the time to accompany her.

However, Baron Sherstok wouldn't know such a thing. The baron is one of those nobles without land of his own, so he basically has very little to do with high noble society, and he wouldn't know how busy I am or that I have zero interest in dolls.

That said, giving a doll as a gift to his ten year old daughter Elise, this is a very common type of present. In the eyes of most people, I'm probably more of the odd one for not taking the time to play.

Knowing my personal preferences on dolls, Earl Terejia perfunctorily left the office. Left alone, I glanced again at the glittering, sparkly doll.

What do I do, with this. Am I supposed to play with it.

I held its head, and kept wondering what to do.

……In short, Elise is supposed to play with this, I wonder if I should find some playmates for her. I'd think that I don't necessarily have to be the person playing with her.

While thinking about passing that role on to Ratoka, I started playing with the thick skirt on the doll. Without a doubt, the doll's costume was overly extravagant, and the embroidery was so fine that I could barely see the stitches connecting the cloth together. A golden rose was sewn neatly into the top of the skirt, reflecting the sunlight prettily.

"……Mm,"

The more I looked at it, the more I felt like something was slightly off about the embroidery. I kept turning the doll around in my hands, and one part just seemed slightly different.

I flipped up the skirt and checked underneath, and as expected the same type of embroidery was underneath it as well. While I tilted my head and wondered just what it was about this embroidery that seemed strange, I suddenly realized that it seemed almost like it was in the shape of letters of the alphabet.

When I started trying to read it, although it was a bit difficult due to the tiny size and a lack of spaces, it seems that it was an actual message.

"I see, so it was a secret letter."

Earl Terejia read the message that I wrote down for him on a piece of paper.

"It would seem that this rose is a sign to check for a hidden message. Since Elise usually doesn't come out of her room while she's recuperating from her illness here,

it seems that Viscount Stadel must have developed these codes and hidden messages for her as a game."

Elise's uncle, Viscount Stadel, especially dotes on her as she used to be in such poor health that she couldn't even get out of bed on some days. I had heard from Elise herself before that he always tried to think of fun things for her to do to escape the boredom of always being confined to bed, that didn't require her to leave her room.

Since Viscount Stadel doesn't have any children of his own, maybe he's pouring out all his affection for his niece. Also, probably due to Elise's weak body, maybe he's become a little overprotective. That Elise could grow up so innocently in such an environment, I felt a strange sense of admiration.

"And, did you understand what was written there?"

"Yes. If I add in punctuation and spacing, it's not so hard. It's a warning about the movements of the northern nobles."

At hearing about the northern nobles, Earl Terejia frowned slightly in annoyance.

"I hear that some extremist organizations have been gathering around the northern nobles' leader, Marquis Nordsturm's family lately."

"How foolish. They're trying to attack Kaldia politically, and make us return the money given to us for the refugees……"

The earl sighed deeply, seeming worn out.

If I think about it calmly, I can organize my emotions. I'm thankful to Viscount Stadel for the information, although I don't welcome bad news. It's just that right now, there's a shortage of labor in Kaldia.

I recalled the malevolent gazes of the northern nobles last time I met them at the House of Lords, and the depressing atmosphere caused by them. While I haven't verified the contents of this secret letter yet, I definitely believe that I can trust it.

Chapter 74
In a horse-drawn carriage

I've caught the attention of a troublesome opponent, I sighed mentally.

The Nordsturm family is a major noble family from the north, and their current family head is Marquis Nordsturm. Three generations ago, they had also been married to royalty, so they still have quite the connections in the royal capital as well.

Although they have a bad reputation from the fact that their power comes from the moneylending business, because of it very few nobles dare to go against them. What's more, many of the northern nobles are related to the Nordsturms by being one of their branch families or through marriage in some way, so their influence in northern Arxia is even greater than that of the royal family.

At one time, the north had been treated as the least important part of Arxia. There was the Amon Nor Mountains forming a natural barrier with the eastern countries, and there was nothing but rough sea waves on the northern border, both of these geographical attributes contributed to making the north a formidable natural fortress.

It was a bad location for conducting trade on the seas. Although it's possible to travel east to other countries farther down, a large section of the coastline bordering Arxia's is controlled by Densel, or belongs to the Rindarl Union that opposes us. Their naval technologies weren't very far advanced either.

The earth was frozen over in many places, and even what wasn't frozen over was very poor land for raising crops, so it was overall a very poor region.

Because of that, the Nordsturm family has been the only noble family ever since Arxia was founded that's ruled in the north. Because talented people would be placed in more important places to make use of their skills at governing, no aristocrats were ever sent to the north.

Of course, ruling over the vast north would be impossible for only the family head, so the Nordsturm family divided the northern lands among its own family members, and starting from about one hundred and twenty years ago, their current governing

system is basically a group of lords that all report to the leader of the Nordsturm family.

For the Nordsturm family who has such power in the north to still have good relations with the royal family, it's simply because of money. First of all, the Nordsturms are talented at making money in the north. Their most prosperous city is the city where the marquis currently resides, it's a place where people and goods gather.

Next, the north helps with the country's military spending every year even though it benefits them the least. They also have vast sums of money stored away, and they've recently started lending money to their neighboring domains, and simply the interest on the loans were already more than sufficient already to cover all the north's expenses for governing their territory.

I remembered how Earl Terejia had taught me that a member of the royalty had gotten married to a Nordsturm as a political sacrificial pawn, in order to obtain part of the Nordsturm family's wealth for the sake of the country.

There are two royal families in Arxia, meant to be as a measure for keeping the throne out of the reach of any other non-royal family. A daughter from the current royal family that isn't on the throne, the Melloart family, had married a Nordsturm in exchange for one third of the Nordsturm family's wealth being donated to the national treasury. Earl Terejia had told me that it was a story he heard from his older brother Marquis Rittergau who's working in the royal palace as the prime minister of Arxia, so it must be true.

Their wealth had been reduced, and the Nordsturms also attracted the hostility of other nobles in Arxia with connections to the royalty. I want them to just take a break and ignore me, but it seems there's no helping it.

In the first place, the reason why I attracted their attention was because half of the entire defense budget financed by the north was allotted to only three domains, which were Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas, the eastern border domains. Any funds that were not used for the sake of defense were supposed to be properly returned to the House of Lords.

The northern nobles are taking it out on only Kaldia, meaning me, as Earl Einsbark who's in charge of the Jugfena domain and Margrave Genas are too powerful for them

to attack politically, so out of simple spite, or maybe picking on weaklings, they're taking it out on me for being a financial beneficiary of their funds.

"I'm actually relieved to see that gloomy expression of yours finally returning."

As the horse-drawn carriage clattered and shook, Earl Terejia who was sitting across from me said so with a snort from his nose. Claudia sitting next to him also nodded in agreement.

"At any rate, let's settle this problem quickly. Jugfena and Genas have organized their own domains much faster and better than Kaldia, that's because Earl Terejia has been deciding policy matters in my place up until now. For the Nordsturm family that isn't well armed militarily, they would gain nothing from moving against all three of the Terejia, Genas, and Einsbark families at once."

"The Nordsturm family should be aware of that as well. Still, saying something like moving against all three families, does this mean that you see a way to cooperate with the other families?"

What I'm concerned about right now is, the factions other than the Nordsturm family.

The Nordsturm family doesn't actually have much power other than lots of money and the support of the northern nobles. That alone wouldn't be a threat by itself. However, depending on who allies with whom, things could get a lot more troublesome. I think the problem lies in how the Nordsturm family utilizes their vast fortune.

"If the Nordsturms seriously attempted it, do you think they have enough power to overthrow the current government?"

Earl Terejia raised his eyebrows greatly at my question. Since the north regularly finances the other domains with their extra funds, decided through meetings at the House of Lords, it means they get more of a say in issues compared to the rest of the nobility. Meaning, they already control much of national policy.

By the way, the House of Lords only consists of domain lords with the rank of viscount or higher, and court aristocrats with the rank of earl or higher. Lower ranked nobles are supposed to be represented by nobles higher-ranking than they are. It's like how I used to not attend meetings at the House of Lords, as Earl Terejia attended them for me on my behalf.

“I don’t think they would try something like that though, would the conservative northern nobles really rebel against a decision made by the House of Lords?”

I answered my own question, and the earl nodded in assent. Although the northern nobles are conservative in a different sense from the court aristocracy, I think that they wouldn’t want to take any risks that would end up lessening their influence.

Since the Nordsturm family currently seems to be gathering power right now, I definitely think it would be for the better if I think of something I can use against them first. It never hurts to be wary.

Earl Terejia unexpectedly looked out the window. While watching the scenery pass by, he was probably thinking about something. Our conversation ended as well when the earl looked away. Because there’s many things to be worried about, both of us are probably thinking about things regarding the northern nobles that we’re going to have to deal with someday.

However.

“……The Nordsturm family’s time may be unexpectedly ending soon, to be replaced by someone else.”

Earl Terejia suddenly said that out loud after a while. Is this some sort of prophecy, once again I confirmed to myself that the earl is quite terrifying.

Chapter 75
Townhouse

The rocky, clattering horse-drawn carriage took two days to finally arrive at its destination. In the outermost section of the nobles' living quarters in the royal capital, separated from the commoners' quarters by a single fence, we stopped at a timeworn small townhouse. It was much shorter than the two story mansion that I live in, and I barely even need to lift my head to look up.

"We're here……"

A sigh slipped out from Earl Terejia. Then, he looked at me.

"You, is this really fine?"

"It's just a place to stay at while we're in the royal capital anyways."

The earl shrugged, and looked back at the townhouse distastefully. This townhouse is the first thing that I've ever bought for myself in this life, meaning, it was also a bit small and narrow.

After the battle at Fort Jugfena, although dealing with the aftermath of that battle was finally over, I'm still quite busy and have to go between my domain and the royal capital quite often. Since the House of Lords has regular meetings in summer and autumn, it's a bustling social season at the royal capital. Most nobles with their own domains also have mansions in the royal capital, and this could be a good opportunity to deepen my network of contacts.

Especially from mid-summer to autumn, there's quite a lot of events that gather many people, such as social debuts for newcomers, dance balls, and church festivals.

Of course, although Earl Terejia is already a very experienced court aristocrat, I haven't even reached adult age yet, let alone made my social debut, so it should still be about a decade before those social events have anything to do with me.

……Although that's how it should have been, contrary to all that there was actually a mountain of invitations from various nobles piled up back home in the domain lord's office. The reason was simply that everyone wanted to get acquainted with me to establish a useful contact for future negotiations.

Because of the four eastern dukedoms combining to become the Rindarl Union, and the unprovoked attack from Densel, we were on the highest level of alert against them. Of course, domestic attention was also on the eastern domains that bordered the enemy, the domains of Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas.

The House of Lords was giving these three domains extra financial support, but now the system of payments to us was being re-organized, as some of the domain lords were now moving to have some of that money returned.

Since there was so much attention on our domains, it's also opened up new market opportunities for Jugfena and Genas, as well as Kaldia, for being the country's first line of defense. Due to all the military equipment and facilities that must be made, as well as the large number of goods that the new citizens would need, that's why so many nobles have all sent me their invitations.

In short, every domain wants new trade opportunities.

Although it was a bit of a superfluous rule, in Arxia there's a custom that children that haven't reached adult age yet shouldn't attend social events other than ones that they're hosting, as a matter of etiquette. However, because I'm a domain lord before I'm a child, there's a relentless number of invitations being sent my way. Usually, it would be the reverse, where someone is a child before they're a noble.

……Because of my circumstances, I now have a full schedule of luncheon and evening meetings every day. It's actually a bit hard on my body as I'm still quite young, but I won't say a single word of complaint. I don't have anyone to complain to anyways.

So that I don't always have to stay at Earl Terejia's place whenever I visit the royal capital, I bought this tiny house on the very outskirts of the noble area.

It does seem to be rather decayed, but well, because I don't have to stay here for very long each time, it doesn't matter. I don't care about the outside, I've already had the interior fixed up.

I sank myself into a non brand name, cheap, yet still well made sofa, and I looked at the exposed red bricks and wood that seemed to give a feeling of warmth to the plaster walls, I think I like it.

“Elise, give me my schedule for tonight and tomorrow.”

“Uh, ……ah. Tonight, you’re organizing documents in the office. ……Tomorrow, during the day…… The tailor is coming over to take measurements. Tomorrow evening, um, you’re attending Margrave Molton’s party.”

When I pestered Ratoka who had been forced to stand beside me in maid attire, he read off my schedule he was holding to me in a fluster. Recently Bellway had been teaching him various things he needed to know to attend to me.

I mostly intended to make Ratoka into a personal maid, rather than a personal attendant, but if he knows how to do more things, that’s pretty convenient too. Although doing this does seem to have added to his dislike of me, but little by little, it feels like things have gotten more informal between us.

“The day after tomorrow it seems that you have a Sacred Code study session at the church. Also, there’s luggage to be organized in the office still, what should we do?”

“I’ll go after I’m done drinking my tea.”

“……Your tea you say, but what about your maid?”

“You’re so dense. That means you should go right now.”

“Ahh…… So that’s it.”

Ratoka nodded, although he still had an expression that didn’t quite seem convinced.

He turned around, and left while walking awkwardly, still unused to the heels and skirt he was wearing, and he passed by Claudia who was leaning against the wall next to the fireplace on his way out, sighing slightly at what he had to endure from me.

She met my gaze and didn’t even try to conceal that she was laughing, still giggling as she shrugged her shoulders lightly at me.

“……What is it.”

“Nothing, I just thought that you’re having quite a lot of fun with him.”

Claudia had continued to remain being my bodyguard, but since at the mansion I would have other guards as well, this is actually the first time that she’s seen me interacting with Ratoka.

“When Ellusia-dono is talking with him, you seem quite surprisingly lively. As expected, it must be because of something like you two being close in age?”

“Well…… I wonder. Also, it’s not Ellusia, it’s Eliza.”

“Mm, I got it wrong again. Sorry.”

Somehow, I don’t think it’s because that I’m close in age to him. What’s more, why is it that I treat only Ratoka so casually, I can’t even say for myself why that is.

“However, when I look at you like this, not only do you seem surprisingly lively, you also seem to be having fun, and even give off the impression of relaxing a little. How should I describe it……”

Claudia seemed lost for words, and began muttering to herself. It seems that she isn’t going to say anything else to me, so I turned towards the window to look outside.

On the other side of the window glass was the sky tinted a shade of red. It gets dark later here in the royal capital than in Kaldia, it would have been completely dark at this same time in Kaldia already.

What remained the same in the royal capital as Kaldia, was that the lights here were also candlelight as well. It’s too expensive to use anything else after sunset.

Just like I declared earlier, I headed to the office as well after finishing my cup of tea. That said, all I’m going to do, is organize what’s on the desk so that it’s more convenient for me to use, and I finished immediately.

When I looked back at Claudia I realized she was no longer talking to herself. She was looking directly at me with those sky blue eyes of hers, with a difficult to describe, somewhat wondrous expression on her face. I didn’t know what to say to that reaction of hers, so I couldn’t help but freeze up.

I just stayed like that and blinked several times.

“Ahh, that’s it! It feels like Eliza-dono is finally opening her heart, and calming down. When the person I’m supposed to be protecting isn’t wary, then I’m not wary either.”

Suddenly Claudia said that out loud with an extremely self-satisfied expression on her face, while I felt as if my chest was freezing over, even though I knew it was an illusion.

“……Eliza-dono, what’s that matter? It couldn’t be, did I get your name wrong again!?”

“……No, that’s not it.”

Even though my frozen muscles were protesting, I somehow managed to squeeze those words out of me. Her words had made me realize just what I was feeling, which really made me want to groan out loud.

Chapter 76
Apple juice

“Hey, it’s been a long time, Viscountess Kaldia. Thank you for coming today.”

“Thank you very much for inviting me here as well, Lord Molton.”

I had great difficulty as I was currently struggling with wearing a formal dress for the first time, as I greeted tonight’s host, accompanied by Claudia who was dressed in maid attire. The beautiful margrave that I met last year was standing in the back of the dining hall, and after he saw me, he stumbled quite a bit over his words.

“It looks like you’re wearing a dress this time. It looks really good on you. While you looked quite cool and dignified in knightly attire before, you also really impress when you look feminine as well, and show off your strength.”

Margrave Molton gently gave his opinion of me in my dress. I’ve always worn knightly attire before when out in public, so this time I could definitely feel that I was the center of attention of all the nobles.

“And how should I interpret that?”

“I don’t mean anything bad by it. I’m not trying to insult you, I think it’s proof that you’re reliable.”

As typical of him, he was laughing happily, and his silver hair was shaking slightly. I feel a bit relieved that I can read his intentions so easily without any misunderstandings.

“How’s Earl Terejia been doing lately?”

“That’s…… He doesn’t seem to be feeling so well…… It’s just a little fatigue though.”

With his work as my regent combined with all these daily social events, and two full days of riding on a horse-drawn carriage definitely seems to be taking its toll on him.

Even I think that he's been overworking himself, but still there's so much work that only he can do. We definitely need to hire more people, there's no doubt about that.

Margrave Molton looked around at the table behind him, and took two wine glasses. Then, he poured a liquid that resembled white wine from a bottle.

When I took the glass he offered me, I saw that he was apparently offering me apple juice. I couldn't help but look up at him, only to see the margrave smiling elegantly at me. Out of all the social events I've been invited to, attending so many that I've lost count, this is the first time that someone's specially prepared a drink suitable for children – meaning me.

I definitely believe he's praiseworthy. It's not just that he has a son the same age as me, he treats me with kindness and without any prejudice, even though I'm the daughter of the Kaldia family.

My notorious father and family have left quite a dark stain on my name. They were considered apostates, the scourge of the nobility. Although it wasn't a formal decision by the House of Lords or anything, the northern nobles and those in agreement with them definitely think so inside.

We toasted each other and gulped down the contents of our glasses. It was refreshingly sweet with just a tinge of sourness to it, it reminded me of the apple juice that I liked to drink as well in my previous life.

Margrave Molton pulled two chairs over for Claudia and I, and even served Claudia a glass of juice as well.

It's still a bit early for dinner, but there are refreshments and snacks. People are also resting here from the dancing they're doing in the hall.

Since the margrave pulled a chair over personally for me, it would be rude to decline to sit down. Claudia and I both sat down facing the margrave.

"……Come to think of it, I haven't seen your personal attendant lately."

He's probably referring to all the times we've met before at other social events. The margrave looked at Claudia for a moment, then looked back at me.

He's asking about Kamil. The moment I thought about him, I recalled the bloody figure of Kamil in the back of my mind.

The sound that was made as Claudia put her glass down next to me was tiny, but I heard it very clearly. Margrave Molton's beautiful smile disappeared instantly at my next comment.

"He died at Jugfena."

My voice was shivering as I said the words so directly. My lips were trembling ever so slightly.

"That's, ……"

The margrave probably noticed my emotions. His voice sounded a bit strained as well.

"……My apologies. Sorry for bringing up something unpleasant."

He said it in a simple tone of voice and his expression was full of compassion. He probably saw a child similar to his son in me.

I lifted my glass, and had another mouthful of juice. My throat had dried up without my realizing it, so I had a second helping, then a third.

Suddenly, I felt pity for the margrave as well. I wonder if he's realized now that children as young as his son are dying in war. And if that's the case, just how sorrowful that life can be.

"I shall pray that his kind soul obtains Misorua's blessings."

"……Thank you very much."

The margrave quietly raised his glass. For a moment, without saying anything, he merely prayed for the well-being of my former personal attendant's soul.

On my way back in the horse-drawn carriage, I merely looked out the window without saying anything. In my hands were some sweets wrapped up in decorative paper. Margrave Molton had given them to me as a present.

"……Are secret messages and codes typical for nobles, I wonder?"

"Are they?"

"No…… it's nothing."

I couldn't help but ask Claudia a question, but only got a blank look in response, which made me realize that it was useless to ask her, so I fell silent.

The sweets were wrapped up in several layers of paper, and on the inside of the outermost layer, there was a message from Margrave Molton.

It's a custom to not tear up beautiful wrapping paper, so that it can be used again at a later date as a letter or message card. I would have noticed it sooner or later, but because I have a habit of sending a thank you message to people for inviting me, I found it immediately.

The message was about people passing through Margrave Molton's domain to go visit the northern domains. Some traveling church sisters were being strangely active, and were involving themselves with the northern nobles. Why did Margrave Molton tell me this, I wonder. Exactly what are these church sisters up to.

Since I had very little information to go off of, it's a bit frustrating. I sighed and looked outside the window at the scenery again. Claudia sitting across from me was in such an excellent mood from having gotten to eat all sorts of sweets at Margrave Molton's party, that she started humming.

Chapter 77
New things

The next day, early in the morning, I was already riding my horse.

I'm riding east on a road leading out of the royal capital. Riding next to me was Paulo, as well as Ratoka who was dressed in girl's clothing and wearing a veil, while behind me were Claudia and Bellway, sharing a horse together.

Last night, Paulo had rode a messenger horse to inform me about a bandit group's invasion from the neighboring country.

They had been hiding themselves around the outskirts of the Monster Forest in the Jugfena domain, and they seem to have often invaded Margrave Genas's domain, but there weren't enough troops to guard the border against them.

Under a pincer attack from the troops of both the Jugfena and Genas domains, the only place they could escape to geographically, was unfortunately the Kaldia domain.

Thanks to Ergnade informing me of his plans beforehand, my troops were already spread out throughout Kaldia, and volunteers from the Shiru tribe were also on the lookout against the bandits as well. It'll be good if we can capture them before any citizens are harmed……

I canceled the church activity that I was supposed to attend. The head priest was supposed to come as well, and I had really wanted to build some direct connections within the church, but there's no helping it given the current circumstances. Hopefully I can make up for it if I return.

Even so, I won't be able to return to the royal capital for quite some time. Also, Earl Terejia has been feeling rather under the weather with his body in bad condition lately.

At this time of year, many nobles gather in the royal capital. Marquis Nordstrom's retinue is also here currently. During this time that I'm away from the capital, I don't know what they're going to say about me.

It'll probably be something disadvantageous to me that can't be confirmed immediately by third parties, though.

We passed by my original mansion, finally reaching the central portion of my domain deep into the night, where a new domain lord's residence had been constructed. The supplies for constructing this new residence had mostly come from the surrounding mountains, as the Amon Nor mountains were directly east of here, and there was a river flowing down from them that provided water as well.

This river, the Sera River, runs parallel to a river that's on our western border, the Rukter River. Upstream from here is Cyril village. Also, on the eastern side of the Sera River, is a flat region filled with lakes and plains.

"You've arrived, my lord."

Just as I jumped off my horse, I heard the Artolan language from behind me. When I looked back, I saw a young man from the Shiru tribe running towards me, wearing a tunic with their unique designs.

"Ahh, I just got back. How are things in Kaldia, Teo?"

Teo – this young man named Teomer, was the person directly chosen by the Shiru tribe to be their representative in all things related to me. He also happens to be the leader of their young warriors, so of course, I've talked to him the most out of anyone from their tribe.

"Right now my forces are searching east of the Sera River for the bandits. I don't believe they've crossed west of the river yet. The guys from the army are guarding the villages and the river. Those were Gunther's orders."

"I see. ……It's easier to track them in the plains. But since we can't find them, they might have left our domain already. Maybe just like when the Jugfena soldiers were chasing them, they crossed over into the Genas domain again. ……If only we could get into contact with the Genas domain's army……"

I happened to glance at Bellway as I said that, but he shook his head.

“I sent a messenger pigeon out, but…… The reply I got from Margrave Genas’s wife was that ‘each domain should take care of its own problems.’”

Teo and I nodded without surprise at this. It’s very well known that Margrave Genas’s wife runs most of the internal affairs in the Genas domain, and that she hates Kaldia. Due to my late father’s insane hobbies, and the fact that I’ve inherited his looks and that the Kaldias have received the nickname of “the demon family,” Margrave Genas’s wife doesn’t hide her distaste for us at all. Her disgust at how the biggest victims of my parents’ insanity were Kaldia’s own citizens probably led to her attitude towards the entire Kaldia domain. Although I don’t know the details, there’s also rumors that her father and my grandfather had been archenemies as well.

“Teo, do you still have warriors available to move out right away at this moment?”

“……Ahh, half of them are still here, helping with the village’s construction.”

“Construction can wait until later. Summon all the remaining warriors here.”

Teo didn’t nod at me in acknowledgement. He stepped up to me, kneeled, and grabbed my shoulder. He probably didn’t hold back his strength at all, I could hear some grinding sounds coming from my tiny shoulder.

I gritted my teeth and bore the pain. I didn’t even allow my cheek muscles to twitch in the slightest. I met Teo’s sharp gaze directly as he spoke.

“I can’t agree to having the construction of our living quarters be delayed. Or are you saying, that the original citizens of your domain are more important than us, the newcomers? You’re the one who told us originally that you would treat us the same.”

Construction had already fallen far behind schedule. The original leader of the project, Kamil, has died. The refugee farmers that would have been numbers to help the construction have also been slaughtered, and the new construction overseer, me, had been out for some time. They’re using construction materials that they’re not used to, and getting used to living in an entirely new environment.

To him, finishing the construction for his tribe is critically important. I also knew beforehand how passionate he was about this.

Teomer is one of the leaders of the Shiru tribe. During his tribe’s long escape from the Densel army, several of their leaders perished, so he had been chosen as one of their

new leaders. Among his tribe's eight leaders, he's the only young one, but his age didn't matter. Young and old, everyone in the Shiru tribe respected him, and pinned their hopes on him.

I put my own tiny hand on top of Teo's hand on my shoulder.

"Teomer Terit, I'm also troubled by the fact that the construction of your tribe's living quarters isn't complete yet. ……But, I wasn't in the royal capital to play around. It'll be no problem to stop the construction temporarily."

Teo blinked slowly. In his stone grey eyes, a flame seemed to be flickering.

"……You have some sort of measures in place?"

"I had a discussion with Lord Carson about hiring some carpenters. Next month, sixty carpenters will be arriving here, bringing their entire workshop. From furniture to more difficult things such as boats and bridges, they'll be building those for us. They're currently working on processing the wood to be used. I also asked them to prepare some spinning wheels and weaving machines."

Indeed, I didn't have the luxury of playing around in the royal capital at all. I don't have the free time, or the right, to do such a thing. I continued speaking.

"I know. I presumptuously said that I'd accept your tribe, but my original citizens have negative feelings towards me. Even so, I have the duty to protect everyone, which is why I have to make use of your warriors. ……I may not be able to live the lifestyle of a warrior, but this is something I simply have to do out of my own pride."

Teo's hand on my shoulder completely loosened its grip. He looked straight into my eyes that were the color of blood. A blaze burned brightly in his eyes, feeling similar to when Earl Terejia was looking straight at me as if he could see through me. He could see himself reflected in my eyes.

Under the urging of Claudia behind me, he finally got up. Then, he bowed deeply towards me.

"……I apologize for my rudeness. As my lord has commanded, I'll summon all of the warriors in the village here. Let's search westward."

"That'll be helpful. ……Thank you."

Chapter 78
Search

The torchlight was flickering on this dark, moonless night. This year as well, there were a few phosphorescent moths flying about. From the tiny hill, their light was all I could see that was moving.

Teo had gathered the warriors, and we've already been searching for the bandits for half an hour. I borrowed a tent, and Ratoka went to sleep first in it. I'm getting sleepy as well, but since I'm still waiting on a report, I stood waiting outside the tent.

Suddenly, I heard a loud flapping sound from above me, and I lifted my head to look at the sky. It seems that Rashiok detected my return somehow, it was his wings causing the commotion. The huge draconis now currently hovering in front of me, had already grown to be as big as a horse. He's still far from reaching maturity, but his body's already grown.

Rashiok slowly lowered that beautiful body of his in front of me. He greeted me with a growl that meant he wanted to be spoiled, he must have not wanted to be left behind at my original mansion while I'm doing all these things here.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Rashiok. I guess I didn't promise a time I would be back by."

His ears bent back just like a dog's would. As I carefully petted him so that I wouldn't accidentally scrape off any of his scales, he closed his eyes and seemed to enjoy it.

"It seems that a bandit group from the Densel Dukedom has invaded us. ……It seems that our neighbors just won't give us a break. If only they would take Earl Terejia's age into consideration and let him rest."

Although I was using sarcasm, just like a human would respond, Rashiok snorted at my comment.

Bandit groups. I slowly took over my time to think about them. They seem to be common in this world, and just a few years ago, they used to be a problem here in Kaldia as well. Well, most of them were pacified after my father died, with them

becoming soldiers in the Kaldia army. Earl Terejia's viewpoint was that they were more victims than aggressors due to my father's despotic policies, and emphasized allowing them to make up for their crimes by joining the military. Some people still remain unaccounted for, but for now, there's no major bandit problems in the kingdom of Arxia.

Most bandits, only turned to banditry because they had no other way of making a living. Most of them were originally farmers, and it was hunger and poverty that forced them into banditry. With the way that Kaldia had been, where people didn't have money, food, or even clothes at times since my father had taken everything from his citizens, it was only natural that bandits would appear.

This time though, a bandit group has taken the trouble of crossing the border between countries to invade us. What's more, the public peace and order is usually much better in Arxia than it is in Densel. At first, I thought that the bandits were invading for some strategic purpose, but it seems that they've only been pillaging and plundering.

If they have some sort of purpose in mind, I wouldn't know. It would be nice if I could come up with some clever method to capture them.

– Some of the tools in the deepest part of my mansion's dungeon, I wonder if I should make use of them.

I kept thinking about such matters while paying no attention to the flickering torchlight in front of me. A bandit group has invaded us from the neighboring country which we have bad relations with. The bandits passed through Jugfena without suffering any damage. I asked for cooperation from Genas, but was rejected. If I can just catch them, any information leaked about them as well as how I deal with them will be completely up to the discretion of Earl Terejia and I.

In other words, trying to get information out of them is also the capturer's job. For the second time, I thought about the tools I had placed into the deepest part of the dungeon, a relic of my father's twisted hobbies, but unfortunately it looks probable that I might be the very one to bring them out again. I can't exactly sell them, and I had kept them thinking that maybe I would have them melted down and made into weapons as they were made of iron.

The memories of how to use them are still vividly etched into my mind, forced upon me as I was already self-aware with my reincarnated memories when I was one year old, without the ability yet to fully control my body.

I also gained the knowledge of how to toy with people's lives and spirits. No matter how disgusting I find it, I was born into the Kaldia family after all.

Rashiok's ears suddenly jumped up from their flattened state while I was stroking him, and he started watching the path to the hilltop I was on. After a little while, I saw some people riding up the hill on horseback. The person leading them was Gunther.

"My lord!"

Gunther and his subordinates got off their horses as they approached me, and kneeled. He chuckled a little at seeing Rashiok by my side, but his expression immediately got serious as he said "reporting in."

"Gunther, what information do you have?"

"The Shiru warriors that were searching along the borders found evidence of track marks along our Genas border, from when the bandits crossed over. The closest places to where they entered are Charon village and Nezu village, and there's a report from Nezu village that two girls living together there have been missing since earlier today."

As expected, the bandit group has invaded us, making use of the border with Genas repeatedly. If they cross the border, my troops won't be allowed to chase them. How impudent, they're making use of our internal political conflicts to their advantage.

"Search for them. Have our most skilled trackers follow the trail for as far as possible. Take Rashiok along with you. Claudia and I shall go to Nezu village. Our first priority should be the safety of the missing two girls."

"Understood. I'll leave three soldiers here to help protect you."

Without waiting for anything else, Gunther jumped onto his horse and rode off. I had already finished giving my orders, so I didn't mind. The sound of his horse's hooves soon faded. After I rubbed his head a bit, Rashiok took off into the night as well almost silently.

I had the three soldiers that Gunther left me ride by Claudia, and I got on my horse as well. I'll just leave Ratoka here. I'm going to narrow the search area to the southeast part of my domain, and I also ordered all the Shiru warriors searching nearby to join me, as I headed for Nezu village.

Being nomads, the Shiru warriors are extremely skilled trackers. When hunting, it's said that no prey can escape them once they've caught up. It all depends on luck now if they're still currently here in Kaldia or if they've crossed back over to Genas. I'm going to have to leave the fate of my two missing citizens, well, up to fate.

Chapter 79
Is anger supposed to be cold?

Now that I've reached Nezu village, I can finally rest a little. Although personally I would prefer to not go to sleep yet as my mind is still sharp, my young body is telling me that it's tired. It's getting late in the night as well, so it'll be difficult to fight off the desire to sleep. I borrowed a room in one of the mayor's houses, as he also happened to be the biggest landlord in Nezu village. I fell asleep almost instantly upon reaching my bed, but I woke up quickly the next morning as well, getting up together with dawn.

I changed out of my clothes that I hadn't bothered getting out of last night, and wiped myself with a wet towel from a bucket provided for me last night. I used a cheap cotton cloth to clean my teeth.

When I finished and walked out of my room, Claudia was sitting there waiting for me, and she greeted me.

"Did you manage to get some rest, Ellusia-dono?"

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono. Good morning. I'm feeling fine, strangely not tired at all."

"That's good to hear, Eliza-dono."

Claudia, who had spent the entire night guarding my room, sounded a little less energetic compared to normal. She hasn't been resting enough ever since we left the royal capital as she's been entirely focused on being my personal bodyguard. I'm really going to have to make her rest a lot after this commotion is over and taken care of. – In the first place, it's a bit too much to ask her to be my only bodyguard. It was a bit easier when I was back at the mansion, but now that I'm currently out on the move, there's a lot more things to deal with.

When I went downstairs, the mayor's wife had already prepared breakfast for me. When everyone saw me, a small sound of lamentation broke the silence in the hall.

"Stop that."

In front of something she didn't want to see, the mayor's wife put a quick stop to the lamenting. The mayor's wife was a woman of more than 30 years old, but she wouldn't even look directly at me. I properly thanked the mayor's wife for hosting and feeding me, but she pitifully just kept trembling. Although she seemed like she was running as if to escape from me, I followed after her to the dining hall where breakfast had been prepared for me. There was no poison or anything unusual, just rye bread commonly found anywhere and egg soup, as well as some sausages. Since sausages are preserved food and the cattle industry hasn't quite recovered yet in Kaldia, this is actually quite luxurious and they're taking rather good care of me.

I don't know whether to feel happy or pained. But in any case, if they treat me well, I'll treat them kindly in turn.

"You seem – to be quite calm."

"Hah?"

"No, Ena-dono…… Whoops, I mean, Eliza-dono, I can see for myself that you always worry yourself over your citizens."

Ahh, how rare, Claudia noticed mid-sentence that she said my name wrong and corrected herself. Meaning, she thinks that I should be more worried, and more angry.

Indeed, that would be normal. I believe that as well.

I'm calmer than she believed I should be, due to the fact that all the Shiru warriors are on the move. My army and the Shiru warriors, will definitely catch the bandits and bring them before me. That's what I believe – or in other words, I trust them. I have to.

"I believe Gunther and Teo will live up to my expectations."

At my reply, Claudia blinked, then she smiled.

When I left the mayor's house, waiting for me outside were Paulo and the three soldiers that Gunther left in charge of my protection yesterday.

"Good morning, my lord."

“Morning. Anything to report?”

“Rashiok’s discovered their tracks. He’s currently following them.”

Paulo answered with a lively voice. He had only been a novice soldier in training just last year, but it feels like all the soldiers that returned from Fort Jugfena have really matured. Speaking of maturing, Rashiok is now the size of a horse, it’s getting difficult for me who’s still quite short to get on his back. Being the intelligent draconis he is, he’s using his other abilities to assist me.

……I stopped myself from getting lost in my thoughts and asked Paulo, “anything else?” He seemed to hesitate a little, before opening his mouth again.

“Also…… we discovered what we believe to be hair strands from the missing women.”

Women’s hair strands, eh. It seems that it was discovered on the side of the road. The rest can be left up to the imagination, the unfortunate plight of the women taken by the bandits. Since we’ve discovered their hair strands while tracking the bandits, it can mostly be confirmed that they’re responsible for kidnapping the women.

It feels like I’m starting to see red.

Last night I still had some doubts about what might have happened, but now it feels like some sort of anger is starting to flow up within me. It’s not irritation or rage, it feels like I’m boiling inside, but I don’t know what word to express it as other than anger.

“Eliza-dono, your eyes are getting really scary.”

At Claudia’s comment, I noticed that Paulo seemed to be getting really scared of me. I wonder just how frightening my face had been. I’m still only seven years old on the outside, I didn’t think I’d be able to leave that much of an impression. I rubbed my eyes, and Paulo appeared slightly relieved.

“Got it, tell everyone that they’re to pick up the pace and keep tracking the bandits.”

“Yes!”

Paulo replied energetically and I saw him off, then I turned to Claudia.

I took out some paper and charcoal wrapped in a bundle from the pouch under my belt, and began writing a simple letter.

“Claudia-dono, I’m relieving you temporarily from your duties as my bodyguard. I want you to take Elise (Ratoka) from Sera River back to my mansion, the Mansion of Golden Hills. Give this letter to him.”

Claudia’s eyes were following the charcoal as I finished writing my simple letter, with her lips moving as she read what I was writing. The memo to Ratoka simply asked him to bring out the whip from the deepest part of the dungeon and bring it to me, as well as making sure the real noble girl Elise didn’t find out about this. That whip has drank the blood of many people, it’s not something that a sickly girl recovering from an illness should be witnessing.

“In order for it to be not said that I’m the incarnation of my father, I’m going to have to consider how to use it.”

“I know you’re not like him.”

”Then, it’s fine.”

Claudia nodded slightly, gave some orders to the three soldiers remaining for my protection, then headed for the stables to get her horse.

I was still seeing red in my vision, and boiling inside. Even so, my head still mysteriously somehow remained as cool as ice. It was as if I managed to remain frozen solid within boiling water.

That’s why, I’m going to wait here. I’m going to wait for my soldiers, my citizens, my draconis to drag those bastards in front of me.

Chapter 80
Protection

Two young women that didn't seem twenty years old yet, were dragged in front of me while frantically crying and screaming by my soldiers, they weren't able to say anything comprehensible.

"Thanks for your work, sorry but, could you guys get out of this room now?"

I realize very well that my voice sounds quite raspy. The soldiers saluted me, then dashed out of the room like they were escaping from me.

I suppose I had indeed only given my soldiers the order to bring the rescued women before me without going into much detail, so this situation can't be helped. The women had been discovered together with the bandit scum that my soldiers recently captured, with plenty of signs of abuse. It would only be natural that they'd be scared of my soldiers and other such men as well right now, increasing their fear. I complimented myself on having the young women from the village prepare something beforehand a few hours ago. I had asked them to prepare a bucket of hot water to wash with and some clean cloths.

"Go ahead and wipe down your bodies. After that, have a meal. It's simple, but feel free to eat as much as you like."

"Yes, domain lord-sama."

The village girl who seemed to have a stronger will looked me in the eyes as she replied. The other girl just nodded her head in fright.

Earlier today around noon, the bandit group had been discovered in a small cottage quite a ways north from Nezu village. Although the summer days are long, it's already getting late as it's dinnertime now.

The mayor's wife had food prepared for us. When we learned about the discovery and capture of the bandit group half an hour ago, we hurriedly contacted the Mansion of Golden Hills and had fruits, vegetables, and bread from there brought over. Ratoka, Claudia, and the three soldiers protecting me took turns in bringing foodstuffs over

from the mansion, but Ratoka wasn't able to hide his dislike of having to make the trip between the mansion and Nezu village twice. Even with a veil, his distaste was plain to see.

"……Don't pout like that. I'll even praise you."

As I said so, I gave that awkward child three fruits known as a rockfruit. This fruit is similar to loquats from my original world. In Kaldia where no edible fruits or berries grow naturally, fruits are considered a luxury. Of course, I didn't buy these, they were given to me recently as a gift when I was making social connections in the royal capital.

"Is this really fine?"

"I told you that I would praise you, didn't I? Besides, it looked like you really wanted to try these in the royal capital."

As my servant in training, Ratoka got to attend several parties and banquets together with me, but servants were only allowed to drink some water and tea, and were not permitted to touch the food for nobles. I know that this child has always had his sight fixed on this sweet-seeming fruit.

And so, Ratoka finally seemed to cheer up from his bad mood as he began eating, and I turned my sight back upon the two girls that were still weeping.

Both of them seemed to evoke a feeling of pity that would make one want to protect them. Although it was easy to infer from the fact that my army found several strands of their hair, parts of their hair was pulled out here and there. It was also easy to tell that they were subjected to violence, as there were multiple black and blue bruises on their bodies. There appeared to be sword injuries and even teeth marks on their arms and legs. Their clothes were tattered, torn almost completely to pieces around the breast area, and their skirts were quite torn up as well. While cleaning themselves up, it only made the injuries and damage even more painfully obvious to see. I think it'll be the best for them if I help them get some new loose-fitting tunics, clothes typical to Kaldia citizens. If they wear something tight with buttons or a corset like what's popular further inland in Arxia, I think that the clothes would only scrape against their injuries and constantly remind them of the pain. Since they're now in front of their domain lord, I'll help them regain their senses, and I shared the food transported here with them.

“Please eat. You’ll feel warmer after a meal.”

Helping them to clean their bodies, allowing them to eat their fill, having only women around them, that should help the two victimized women calm down. Their trembling finally eased as they looked around the room and saw that the only strangers were me and Ratoka, whom they believed to be a girl. At what I was about to do from now on, I started feeling a little melancholy. I need to ask them why the bandits had abducted them. I feel sorry for them that I’m going to be digging up their memories of the things that were probably done to them right after they’ve calmed down a little, but it’s my duty to do so.

“……Have you two calmed down a little?”

I can’t really do much else for the two of them emotionally, I merely stayed here in the same room as them all this time to get them used to my presence. I have a slight feeling of self-loathing right now, but I also simultaneously took out some charcoal and paper.

The two of them nodded nervously. They seemed like they were about to speak to me, but their mothers next to them shot me looks of disapproval. However, I ignored it and carried on.

“What violence those people did to you, anything they said to you, please try to remember it all as clearly as possible.”

I didn’t ask them if it would be alright to ask. This is information that I need to hear immediately.

The two young women instantly turned pale. It looked like they were trying their best to restrain themselves from crying again, as they relived their hellish memories.

At that moment, the charcoal in my hand broke.

I didn’t realize it until now, but it seems that I had been clenching it too tightly. As I took out a new piece of charcoal, I kept telling myself to calm down over and over.

Chapter 81
Interrogation time, part 1

As for what I had done to the captured bandits, I had them gagged by stuffing cloths into their mouths, preventing them from biting their tongues to commit suicide, stripped naked to ensure that there were no hidden weapons on them, and also had their hands bound behind their backs and then threw them into that dark dungeon below my mansion.

It's quite damp down there, it's dark and cold with no sunlight whatsoever, it's definitely a place that puts great stress on the human spirit.

When Ratoka was younger, he had spent three days down there, and he had emerged from it seeming quite haggard. Although he did recover his energy after just a few days.

……Come to think of it, Ratoka retrieved the whip for me from the dungeon with no problems. Although there are a few lights down there, for him to have slept just like normal in the dungeon, that child might actually be more bold than I thought.

The only thing I gave the bandits was one very large barrel of water, then I left them alone in the dungeon for two days. This way, they have to go to the bathroom right there, they're starving, and they can't even drink properly through the cloths in their mouths. It's a method to increase the speed at which their spirits will break down.

On the morning of the third day, I brought a bandit who seemed like he might be one of their leaders out of the dungeon. The bandit probably wasn't able to sleep properly, he looked haggard and pale as he stood in the interrogation room of the barracks. Since I haven't given him anything to eat for two days, he's probably feeling dizzy and nauseous as well.

"I'll ask you this first. You have anything you want to say?"

He had been roughly washed by my soldiers, and was allowed to wear his original clothes again that have been inspected already, but his hair and beard were still filthy and unkempt.

"……I have a very good understanding now of how you barbaric and savage Arxian nobles treat their prisoners. It's been quite a valuable experience."

He's got quite the iron will. He's perceptive as well.

He went to the trouble of talking to me in the Arxian language, he didn't look down on me for being a child, and he even noted that I was "Arxian nobility" on our first meeting.

"This dungeon was left behind by my late father, known for being the most cruel tyrant in all of Arxia. I couldn't think of any place more appropriate for the cultured visitors from another country to relax and rest. I'm sure that you're used to soft beds?"

I smiled at the irony. Although barbaric and savage are meant by him as insults to me, I don't think of it as such. I don't think anyone from Kaldia would think that to be much of an insult either.

The soldiers that were guarding the bandit all laughed in unison. Since they're used to vulgar speech every day, they're much more skilled at ways to insult people. In order to break the prisoners completely, I had to ban several behaviors, and I thought about stopping them, but it seems I was correct not to. The bandit's face started turning slightly red at seeing everyone laugh at him.

"Oh? So even you guys have soft beds? Let me guess, the Arxian nobles and the commoners alike, you all sleep on stacks of straw?"

"Oh, so people in Densel must still sleep on stacks of straw. It seems that your culture must still be quite backwards, that must be really inconvenient. It was the right thing to do to have you guys sleep in the dungeon. After all, even the plain beds that commoners sleep in, are too good for you."

At seeing my snickering, and being lost for words to counter me, the bandit could only curse me out in his native Ringwren language, "damned brat."

My soldiers weren't able to contain their laughter. Is it really that funny, I wonder. While I did order them to be "crass and vulgar" towards the prisoners, and they've followed my orders obediently…… Although I think they would have done so without orders anyways.

Well then, just with this trading of insults alone, I've found out quite a bit about this bandit.

Since I had quite a lot of knowledge about various languages forced into me by Mrs. Marshan, I was able to know that the bandit was cursing me in the Ringwren language. Although he has quite an accent, he's also able to speak Arxian – this means that he's had quite the social upbringing. The Ringwren language is what's spoken in Densel and Planates. Despite the fact that he was cursing me, his pronunciation was very smooth, he's definitely someone from the upper class of society.

And no matter what, he's not saying words I'd expect a bandit to say. However, the information I received from Jugfena was that "a bandit group has invaded our country." On what basis did Jugfena call this group a "bandit group," I need to confirm it.

Well, I'll organize the current information I have for now, and it's about time to start the real interrogation, so I called out to Ratoka who was in the next room. Ratoka is wearing a veil today as well so that the soldiers don't recognize him, but he probably has quite a distorted facial expression under that veil right now.

"Bring that item I had you prepare for me here."

"Yes."

Ratoka approached me, and uncoiled the whip in his hand for me. This whip has many chains and knots to it like a flail, and the knots seem specially designed to cause people to bleed more. I remember that my father gave this whip to my former older brother as a gift on his sixth birthday. I suppose that if my father were still alive, he'd be giving me things like these as gifts too.

Meanwhile, the bandit was looking at the whip with wide eyes of surprise. For the first time since entering this room, I saw his face twitch a little.

"I'm going to ask you some more questions now. I don't mind if you answer them or not, but…… Well, there's still eleven more people in the dungeon that can take your place. But, I'm not going to go get any of them until I'm finished with your interrogation."

At hearing so, the bandit's face started twitching more violently.

“If it gets to the last person, I wonder if he’ll be almost dead of hunger.”

My soldiers kept laughing crassly. I guess it was an effective follow-up blow, the bandit’s face turned completely pale. I see, is there someone he really cares about in there, or someone really important that he can’t allow to die in there, I wonder.

“You…… You wicked heretic!”

He started shouting at me in great anger.

I see, so I’m a heretic. Well then, I absolutely have to hear more about this.

It’s easier than I thought to get information from him, and I began to slightly feel like I may be enjoying this.

Chapter 82
Interrogation time, part 2

"Alright, the first question may seem silly, but why did you guys come to Arxia?"

The bandit glared at me without saying anything. Well, I'm not going to waste words, I ordered the soldiers to force him to kneel, and began whipping him.

Sounds of pain began echoing throughout the interrogation room. Since his clothes are still on, that should mitigate some of the damage. Taking that into consideration, I whipped him another five times.

He was gritting his teeth to deal with the pain, and wouldn't even moan. As I expected, he's not a simple bandit. There's no way that a normal bandit who only invaded Arxia to pillage and steal should have a strong enough will to withstand torture.

"Let me ask a different question. Where were you headed in Arxia?"

"……I'm not familiar with Arxian geography."

I suppose he learned that he'll suffer again if he keeps remaining silent, so he spat that out at me. I'm not impressed by his lie. I whipped him again.

Dark red spots began appearing on his linen shirt. They were shaped like earthworms, marks left by the whip. It seems that his skin is beginning to tear.

They're able to skillfully make use of our internal borders, and escape from the Jugfena cavalry platoons, what a joke, saying he doesn't know Arxian geography.

I switched the whip to my left hand, and continued whipping him with all my strength. The whip made a sharp cracking sound in the air with each swing that mingled with the dull thuds of it striking flesh. The metal chains on it kept causing injuries instantly, staining his shirt red wherever it landed.

He finally managed to moan something out. I saw several of my soldiers grimacing.

"Urgh, n, no…… North…… We were going north!"

“North?”

“Y, yes. Since the southern and eastern domains in Arxia are along the border and on guard against other countries, and have stronger standing armies, we were going north……”

Whatever his reason, it’s true that they were heading north. The Amon Nor mountains run all the way through the northern and eastern parts of Kaldia and Jugfena. Even in summer, it’s very difficult to traverse through that mountain range. As for the bandits’ tracks, ever since the last time they escaped from the Genas domain, they’ve been heading directly north and have been avoiding villages. They crossed into the central portion of Kaldia from Genas, which happens to be close to the Amon Nor mountains. It’s true that they were taking the shortest distance north.

– They sure do have a good understanding of Arxian geography, don’t they.

I begun whipping his legs rather than his back. His back seems quite swollen already. Pain from being whipped is different from other types of pain like being burned, the pain won’t fade easily, it will continue to hurt. People are quite weak to pain.

“Urgh…… Gah……!”

It must be humiliating for him to be tortured by a child. Every time I swung down the whip against his legs, he groaned.

“Why did you abduct those women?”

“To find…… the exact locations of the villages……”

“If that was all, you guys went quite overboard.”

They definitely didn’t need to do what they did to those women if it was only to find out the locations of the villages.

“……Some of the younger ones, they wanted to use them as sex slaves and have some fun…… Agh-!!!”

My whip just happened to connect against his heel just then. It seems that it managed to tear off some flesh, he raised his voice in agony. Maybe he experienced too much

pain all at once, he ended up fainting. Pain aside, this is to be expected. I did have him starved for two days to aid in breaking down his spirit after all.

“Bring me some wine.”

I pointed to a random soldier and had him bring me some of the cheap, low-grade bottles of wine that I had prepared beforehand on a table alongside the wall to this room. There was a strange and heavy atmosphere in the room now after seeing my interrogation. The soldier gingerly handed me a bottle of wine with jerky motions.

I poured the wine onto the bandit’s back. The alcohol began soaking into his blood. The man screamed as he woke up again.

“The interrogation isn’t over yet. Before it ends, you’re not allowed to rest.”

When a person’s mind is in a haze, it makes it difficult to think clearly or come up with lies. Meaning, people under great duress are more likely to tell the truth once they can’t think straight anymore due to the pain.

I swung my whip again, and his screams continued.

It took four days for me to finish interrogating all the bandits. In order for them to not die before giving me all their precious information, I fed them just a little, but of course since I didn’t give them enough, they were tortured all the more by pangs of hunger.

By the time I got through half of them, I was swinging my whip noticeably less times, it seems that I was using some muscles I don’t normally use very much, I definitely felt some dull muscle pain from my arms.

Knowledge gained from my father on torture methods proved quite helpful, and I was able to draw out a lot of information from the bandits. Although I might learn more if I interrogate them more in a second session, for now I’ll just write down what I learned and send a report to Earl Terejia.

– As expected, they weren’t simply a group of bandits. Several of them seem to be highly educated. While Densel is indeed culturally behind Arxia, I can’t imagine that it’s so bad to where their nobles would stoop to being bandits. Meaning, there’s Densel nobility behind these bandits, or maybe something even higher. Taking into

consideration that the first bandit I interrogated called me a “heretic,” there might be some sort of religious entity involved as well.

The religion that Densel believes in has a god named Revua at the top, with various lesser gods below Revua. So compared to the Ar Xia church in Arxia, they’re called the Revua church. I concluded that the first bandit may be a believer of the Revua church…… And thinking along those lines, isn’t there also quite a good chance that they may have disguised themselves as bandits and invaded Arxia for some religious purpose?

Also, I confirmed that their goal was to head “north.” I had already sent out warnings several days ago to various northern nobles about possible danger, even to the Nordsturms that I don’t get along with. Even though they’re opposing the decision of the Hall of Lords, and view me as an eyesore to be dealt with – the Nordsturms are an important noble family, that’s an unavoidable fact, and I’m sure even Earl Terejia would agree with me that I should send them a warning.

Well, I’m only extending them that courtesy assuming that they will at least band together internally against external enemies. It’s a different story if the Nordsturms have some sort of dealings with foreign organizations.

I have no evidence. But, I need to be vigilant.

I finished my report, locked the drawer to my desk, and stretched my back. I winced slightly at my own muscle pain.

Chapter 83
Chatting with Ratoka

It happened right after I finished my second round of interrogations. A messenger pigeon came to us from the House of Lords in the royal capital. The message stated that the bandit group that successfully invaded Arxia have been declared national enemies to be on guard against, and that they were to be taken into custody by the royal army under direct command of the king.

“It’s fortunate that there’s still more than ten days before I have to take them to the royal army.”

“You do realize that they’re going to be taken into custody by the country?”

Ratoka was reacting to the news in the letter. I had just commented on it, and he was asking me why I thought it was lucky. I nodded, and began my explanation. Although I have a ton of work, it’s summer, and the cloying heat is a distraction. I felt like a little change of pace by chatting with Ratoka.

“Although they were captured in the end, they still managed to penetrate through our border domains and even reach further inland. That’s something that hasn’t happened since the great war in which the Artolas Kingdom was destroyed. Our defenses aren’t that light. At the very least, a simple ‘bandit group’ shouldn’t be able to penetrate so far inland.”

“……But, they did get that far.”

I emphasized that they weren’t a simple bandit group, and Ratoka lowered his eyes to look at the floor. It seems that he’s trying to organize the information he knows already with the hint I just gave him, despite his young age, he’s got quite a good brain that works fast. I have the habit of looking down whenever I’m thinking. It seems that he’s copied my habit.

“Mrs. Marshan taught me that information about Arxian internal affairs isn’t very well known outside our country, especially to a hostile country we don’t have a friendly relationship with like Densel.”

“That’s correct.”

“Commoners would have even less access to information about Arxia. The only place in Densel where they would even see Arxians is in the palace at their capital, where Arxian diplomats stay…… For that bandit group to know our borders in such detail, they may have a connection with the Densel palace. Come to think of it, some of them knew how to speak Arxian. Is there a noble mixed in amongst them……”

I nodded at each of his analyses of the information so far, when I suddenly realized that my lips were beginning to shape themselves into the form of a smile. The way this child thinks, while he did receive the same education as I did, he’s really so similar to me. Sharing information with him is a good way to confirm my own theories, it seems quite effective so far as Ratoka’s inferences overlap with mine, this is good. Now that I’ve noticed how smart he is, I’m going to make even more use of him in the future.

“Of course the House of Lords doesn’t know that these bandits are highly educated yet, those nobles are probably of course more concerned with the path the bandits took as they invaded us, feeling suspicious about it. They want to be on guard against the neighboring country, and not let any future invaders get anywhere close to them.”

“Yes, sooner or later our country would learn about us capturing the bandits. That’s why I spent so much energy interrogating the bandits so much.”

Before they were taken away from me, to where I wouldn’t be able to reach them anymore, I wanted to squeeze as much information as possible out of them first. Ratoka nodded, saying “I see.”

I fell silent, and pointed to the bottle of water on the desk. I’d gotten thirsty after all this chatting. Maybe an attitude of serving has been ingrained into him, Ratoka poured a glass of water for me almost unconsciously. This apple mint water has a distinctive cool, refreshing feeling, it completely wiped away the feeling of summer for me. I felt recharged instantly, and continued chatting.

“I suspect that there may be conspirators within our country aiding them. They knew too many details about our internal geography.”

“Conspirators, eh. Indeed, our diplomats should have no reason to teach the enemy about our geography. But, why is it that Arxia is going to all the trouble of taking custody of the bandits and moving them?”

As expected, when it comes to the way that nobles think, Ratoka hasn't learned enough yet and he still can't come up with the reason. He stopped thinking about it, and asked me directly and politely.

"If they're in a dungeon in the royal capital, the nobles can easily go see the prisoners. Since nobles are used to having people at their beck and call, of course they'd want the prisoners within their reach. What's more, if the Nordsturms are involved like I'm worried about, it'll be the most inconvenient for them more than anyone if the bandits remain here as our prisoners."

"But, isn't it dangerous to just obediently hand the prisoners over then?"

"Who said we're just going to obediently hand them over?"

Eh, Ratoka froze for a moment. Then, he hit his hand with his fist after two deep breaths. He has a look of absolute disgust.

"I see. You're going to 'kill' some people, just like you did to me."

"You should be watching your vocabulary and acting more feminine, 'Elise.'"

As I thought, he really thinks in a similar fashion to me. Yes, even if it's an order from the House of Lords, I see no reason to give them all of the bandits. After all, I had the full authority to question them until this letter arrived. Meaning, even if I accidentally killed one or two bandits during the interrogation process, that was a possibility.

"I've already decided who I'm going to have 'killed.' The first bandit I interrogated, and one other, that blonde-haired man. ……I have to take the rest of the bandits to the royal capital like they want. I'll leave the preparations to you, Elise."

I ended my chat with Ratoka there. Although I returned to my domain because of the bandit invasion, I can't just keep them confined here indefinitely and stay here.

Like I promised Teo, I still need to finish the dealings with other nobles about getting tradesmen from their territories to come help in our construction. I had just really wanted to draft up a more organized system of government while I was back here in my domain. There's still several urgent problems I need to resolve about the construction though, so I have to take care of that as well.

It’s the first time I’ve ever had to deal with the paperwork and procedures necessary for accepting so many new citizens, I’ve been incredibly busy with very little time to rest. As for the management work and rebuilding of my domain, I’m beginning to do more and more of it instead of Earl Terejia.

Honestly, that earl…… He’s already so elderly, and thinking about how I was still only seven, I almost wanted to cry a little.

Chapter 84
A proclamation and confusion

I returned to the royal capital, gave the bandits over to the royal army, and headed for Earl Terejia's villa. I went to hear about what happened in the royal capital while I was away, and to report on what happened in my domain, an exchange of information.

"Oh, you've returned?"

"Yes, Earl."

"There's no mistakes in the report from the two female victims from Nezu village?"

"The injuries on their bodies match what they say. The Shiru tribe members that helped in capturing the bandits can confirm this as well."

It seems that Earl Terejia still isn't feeling well, as the meeting was in his bedroom. Looking at the earl in his sleepwear more closely, I feel like he's gotten a bit more gaunt since the last time I saw him. Even though I have grown a little as well, he used to always seem so big to me, and now looking at him he feels thin and small…… He even seems brittle.

"How is your body……"

"I'm just a little fatigued, it's no problem. ……As expected, the years are catching up to me."

Normally, the earl and I would just dispense with the pleasantries and get immediately to business and work. For me to be asking how he is, I wonder if it's because I'm seeing how old he is, lying down in bed. – Well, it's mutual, we both talk only about work. I don't know if Earl Terejia sees me as his subordinate or his employer, but either way, asking him about how his body is or if he's working too hard isn't like me at all.

"Is anything going on in the royal capital?"

Well, I'll cut to the chase with the topic of the earl's body, and get to the main topic. Suddenly, the earl's already strict-seeming face crinkled even further. Something major must have happened, my back felt stiff and tense.

"Several days ago, the royally-sponsored religious festival took place."

"I know about that. If it wasn't for the bandit group incident, I was supposed to have attended that originally."

"It's an important social event that you happened to miss. This religious festival is the largest event of the entire season. But back to the point, the king made an announcement during the festival."

It was an unexpected topic, I couldn't help but blink unconsciously. Because the king personally announced it to all his subjects, it must have been something that affects the entire country. Even so, the king shouldn't have the power to decide national politics all by himself.

The king of Arxia has full authority for managing and governing over the country. But, there's a limit to what any one person can do, and the governing system in Arxia is one where the king shares power with his lords. Recently in the House of Lords, there shouldn't have been any topics that would require the king to directly make an announcement to the citizens.

"It's about the princes."

"……Ah, I see. If it's a royal family matter, then the House of Lords would have no say in it."

I finally got what was going on, and responded affirmatively. I'm still learning more about politics related to the church and royal family, so I wasn't able to instantly connect all the dots this time.

Just recently, I had learned from Mrs. Marshan's lectures that there's two areas of politics where the House of Lords has no right to interfere in. One area is diplomacy with foreign countries, and the other is the affairs of the royal family. Diplomacy is the realm of the king, the archduke's family, and the Upper House of Lords, while matters about the royal family themselves are jointly decided by the royal family, the church, and the Upper House of Lords.

“There’s currently several princes in the royal family, but do you know how many are in line for direct succession to the throne?”

“Yes. Queen Dionesia’s son Prince Albert, and Princess Evaris’s son Prince Alfred, just those two, right?”

When I asked if I was right, Earl Terejia nodded in confirmation like he was saying I did a good job at remembering.

“Are you still in the middle of your classes on current issues within the royal family?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“I’ll explain it simply for you, Queen Dionesia is the daughter of the duke of Planates Dukedom, while Princess Evaris is a princess from the Melloart family. Since the Queen and the Princess have roughly equal status within Arxia, it’s difficult to determine which prince shall become the crown prince.”

At the earl’s explanation, I thought back to the last time he taught me about politics. (TL note: Chapter 74, mentions the Arxian royalty.) With this much of an explanation, I can see where this is going.

“Then, was the announcement at the religious festival about the selection of a crown prince?”

“Correct. The crown prince was announced to be the second prince, Prince Alfred, son of Princess Evaris.”

“Prince Alfred? Not the first prince, Prince Albert?”

It was different from what I expected, so I asked again to make sure. Earl Terejia nodded, so it seems that I didn’t hear incorrectly. I hurriedly tried to recall as much as I can from what I learned about Arxian politics so far. According to Arxian law, there’s indeed no different in status between a queen and princess. But currently, there does exist a difference in status between queen and princess in reality.

Princess Evaris is from the Melloart family, which is one of two Arxian royal families. Together with the current family on the throne, the Teal family, they’re direct descendants of St. Ahar, and they are treated as the same status as the archduke’s family, without holding any positions other than that of family.

On the other hand, when Queen Dionesia married into Arxia from Planates for a political marriage, she didn't have to relinquish her position in Planates. So she's both a queen of Arxia, as well as the daughter of the duke of Planates.

What's more, there's also the matter of the order the princes were born in. Arxia isn't a kingdom in which the eldest inheriting is absolute, but it's a custom. Since Prince Albert's mother is of such high status, and he's the first prince, he should have been announced as the crown prince.

"Nobody doubted that Prince Albert would become the crown prince. Prince Albert is well known in the royal capital for being intelligent. Nothing's lacking about him for him to not become the crown prince."

"……Then how did this happen?"

"I don't know. Because nobody knows, the royal capital is filled with tension and uncertainty at present."

I see, I nodded, and began mentally organizing information. So the crown prince was decided upon as the second prince instead of the first, and the nobles that had supported the first prince to become king were probably quite shaken. ……No wait, just this alone shouldn't be such a big incident. Thinking about it some more, I didn't take into consideration the first prince's mother's background just earlier.

"Since we're currently on guard against Rindarl, there's quite a few nobles that feel animosity towards Planates……"

"That's right. Currently, it wouldn't be wise to provoke Planates though."

Anyone should think that. Even if the king didn't take that into consideration, the Upper House of Lords should have thought about it before making a hasty decision on the crown prince.

"Well, it's useless even if we talk about it. All nobles like us can do is watch and see what happens."

Although I'm still confused, what Earl Terejia is saying is correct. There's nothing I can do about things related to what goes on in the royal palace or in the royal family.

“Well then, can you fill me in with more details on what you heard from those bandits?”

There’s more important things to take care of first, like things related to my domain. And so I stopped worrying about the royal succession, as I changed the topic.

Chapter 85
Dispute at the House of Lords

Just as I had heard from Earl Terejia, the announcement regarding the crown prince resulted in a huge commotion. It was the hottest topic of conversation on every street corner. Of course, this also became an agenda at the House of Lords.

“Has the royal palace given thought to the influence of Planates?”

“With the situation unstable in Rindarl, why are we provoking the friendlier Planates?”

“But if the Eastern countries unite into the Rindarl Union, they’ll become an even larger threat than the Densel Dukedom.”

“Rather, isn’t it dangerous to snub the Queen’s son, just because she’s from Planates?”

“In the first place, there isn’t even a need to decide on a crown prince in such a rush. Prince Albert doesn’t reach adulthood until another four years.”

It became really chaotic as soon as the discussions began. While the House of Lords can’t directly interfere with the royal family’s inheritance issue, it can still indirectly influence it through the Upper House of Lords. The nobles got heated up instantly and immediately directed their bickering towards one of the representatives in the Upper House of Lords, Royal Earl Edna. On just what basis was the second prince gaining the position of crown prince?

Royal Earl Edna answered everyone with a bit of confusion in his own voice.

“Regarding the decision for a crown prince, I myself only found out about it from the royal family two months ago. Prime Minister Rittergau and all of us noble representatives opposed the decision. However, the church and every member of the royal family, with the exception of the queen, approved of making Prince Alfred into the crown prince.”

“Unbelievable. The royal family should know better than anyone how excellent Prince Albert is. The Melloart family aside, for everyone in the Teal family to support Prince Alfred as well……”

The one who had just spoken on how unbelievable it was, was Margrave Genas. Since he’s the lord of one of the most geographically important domains in Arxia, his statement actually carries more weight than that of a lower-ranking representative in the Upper House of Lords such as Royal Earl Edna.

Faced with a rebuke that he himself agreed with, Royal Earl Edna seemed like a frog who was staring down a snake about to eat him. “Take it easy, relax,” Earl Einsbark aimed to defuse the situation. Not only is he the leader of one of the border domains consisting of our country’s line of defense as well as the commander of Fort Jugfena, he’s also from a branch of the royal family with slightly less influence. It seems like one of his roles is to mediate matters between the royal family and the nobles.

While glancing about at the dispute, Earl Terejia began quietly explaining the situation in Rindarl to me. Compared to the adult nobles, I have a glaring lack of overall knowledge, which is why Earl Terejia often gives me short lectures whenever we attend conferences at the House of Lords.

“It can be said that it’s currently a critical time in Rindarl right now. The four dukedoms are under pressure to unite into the Rindarl Union, doing away with the system of the four dukedoms that are remnants of the old Rindarl Kingdom. It means that the dukedoms will disappear and they may unite soon.”

“Well, the four dukedoms surround our entire eastern border. But, what’s been suppressing their unity into one country so far?”

“It’s been mostly just one matter. There is basically no difference in power amongst the four dukedoms. The matter of which among them would determine the central decisions, has been the biggest obstacle to them uniting.”

“They don’t have someone among them who is politically influential enough to become the leader of all four dukedoms?”

I think it’s quite interesting to learn about and deeply analyze political systems here. In my previous world, there was a different system where it was only considered natural that the king was all-powerful and could decide everything. In the case of Rindarl, where the four dukedoms are having difficulties truly coming to terms over

who gets to be at the top, I'm sure that it'll probably just result in having a figurehead leader.

"What will they do politically after they have created the Rindarl Union, I wonder."

"Who knows…… Will they make use of the noble system and royal power, I wonder?"

"While that system can be quite flexible, it'll probably also increase their own internal power struggles."

"No matter the country's political system, one of its biggest headaches has always been the matter of inheritance of power at the top. Just like Arxia currently," the Earl suddenly chuckled. He still appeared to have a pale complexion. He'd recovered enough to get out of bed, but not fully. It seems that he was somewhat straining himself just by attending today's scheduled meeting.

"If the Rindarl Union is close to being established, isn't it definitely a bad idea to aggravate Planates right now?"

"It's difficult to say. It's indeed true that amongst the four dukedoms, Planates is the only one with a friendly trade agreement with us. However, Densel is clearly hostile, while we have almost zero contact with Giograd and Parmigran. So if our relationship with Planates worsens, it'll almost be inevitable that relations with the Rindarl Union would become overwhelmingly bad."

Nothing about this is difficult for me to understand. All the nobles that are currently opposing Second Prince Alfred from becoming the crown prince are probably worried for the same reason. Since Margrave Genas' domain borders Planates, it's only natural for him to be especially worried about this topic to the point of paranoia.

"But as some of the nobles were discussing earlier, the fact that her Royal Highness the Queen also retained her position as the daughter of the Duke of Planates has become a problem."

However, the problems associated with First Prince Albert becoming our next king, I can't infer them because my studies haven't reached that point yet. While I tried to figure out the reason from what the Earl has told me so far, I couldn't understand no matter how hard I thought about it. Well, it can't be helped, I'll ask the reason. As a fellow domain lord in charge of the eastern border's defense, I'll never be able to face Margrave Genas out of shame if I don't learn why First Prince Albert wasn't chosen.

"……So why, did they decide this?"

"Hmph. Well…… Succession rights for the Duke of Planates isn't limited only to males in his direct family, any men that are his blood relatives can qualify. Although eldest sons do get priority."

Rather than answering me directly, he gave me yet another response that would require me to consider the information and come up with the answer myself. That's his usual manner of doing things. It seems that Earl Terejia strongly emphasizes training my logical reasoning ability.

Since the Queen never gave up her position as the daughter of the Duke of Planates, that means she never gave up inheritance rights there…… Right. That means, her son, Prince Albert can inherit in Planates as well……?

"Meaning, because her Royal Highness the Queen didn't give up her position as the Planates Duke's daughter, Prince Albert is also eligible to inherit, and can become the Duke of Planates. Is that it?"

"According to the law of Planates, that is correct."

"I see. That could indeed be quite a problem."

If Prince Albert becomes the crown prince, Arxia would almost certainly become controlled by Planates in the future. It would only be expected that even Planates would use Prince Albert to its own advantage.

There probably weren't any issues when the Queen married into Arxia. However, there is now a looming presence known as the Rindarl Union that's surfaced. It can definitely be quite dangerous for Arxia if the person who inherits the position and royal bloodline of King of Arxia also has close ties with enemies of Arxia.

I've finally figured it out. My head feels refreshed. Now that I have no more doubts and can see the political situation clearly, I suddenly felt really bored listening to the nobles bickering over the succession, without knowing the truth behind the matter.

As for what I think, what this all means, is that the royal family took the Rindarl situation into account when declaring a crown prince. After all, one of the first counter-arguments had been that neither prince was considered an adult yet, and there was no need to choose a crown prince so early.

"……Mm,"

Then, suddenly, just like a flashback, a memory appeared from my sea of thoughts. It was a memory fragment that seemed like it was telling a story to me rather than actually belonging to me.

(The heroine of the otome game is Emilia Rindarl, daughter of the Archduke of the Rindarl Union. She came to the neighboring kingdom of Arxia with the hopes of getting married, which is why she entered the noble school here……)

– That's right. That was the prologue to the otome game.

But even so, I won't consider that to be a future set in stone. I also held a vague feeling of conviction that no matter how much the House of Lords disputed the choice of Second Prince Alfred as the crown prince, that they would not be able to overturn the decision.

Chapter 86
Priest Faris

The season for social gatherings was finally nearing its end, it's about time for the nobles to hire any staff they need from the capital and return to their domains.

After they return to their domains, the harvest season begins. As for us, since the refugees brought us pumpkins this year, and the egg-laying chickens we bought two years ago have been maintaining a steady production, the food available after this year's harvest should be slightly grander than before.

Thanks to the women that survived the era of my father's rule, we didn't lose some of the traditional ways to make some egg dishes. To me, that's a great relief. We've already lost some traditional recipes for meat and fish dishes due to a lack of supplies during that time. ……Thinking about it in reverse, I was able to take advantage of my family's status when I was young, and a few recipes were preserved by us. As for killing my family, I have to believe that I did the right thing. However, I can't deny that adding hemlock into that pot of soup that day was only an impulsive action at the time, due to me being tired of the situation I was in.

That's why, I always have to check to ensure I'm doing the right thing. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to remain mentally resilient and keep my spirit going. I won't allow myself to abandon the role of domain lord just because my heart falters.

"-Oi, oi, are you listening?"

I was startled as someone tapped me on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Ratoka with a bewildered look on his face. I had been too lost in thinking about my own emotional baggage to notice my surroundings, so I blinked once to return myself to normal.

"……Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I just wasn't paying attention because I was thinking about something."

At seeing the look on that child's face in front of me, I couldn't help but laugh a little. Seeing me doing so, Ratoka furrowed his eyebrows slightly.

“Get it together. What if you get assassinated, what would happen to me?”

“I doubt that I would be assassinated here in the royal capital at least.”

“Hnn…… But, you never know who might be planning something!”

As for me, I don’t intend to go picking any fights, but until I’m able to fully rebuild my domain and make it into an iron defense as part of our country’s border, I suppose there will naturally be some danger. What’s more, there are also those that are angry at me simply because I received some of the country’s national defense budget.

In any case, I took another good look at Ratoka.

“……What is it?”

“Would you really be troubled if I died, I was wondering. One year ago, you were so energetic in saying that you’d kill me.”

“Y…… You! Is there no limit to how evil you can be!?”

With a sound of shock, Ratoka gave me a look of disgust. With the straight way he expresses his emotions, what a hot-blooded shonen protagonist he is. Also, I felt a sense of relief that I didn’t feel any killing intent from him anymore.

“My bad, it was a bit much for a joke.”

“Honestly. ……Ah, that’s right. To change the topic, I received a letter from the temple.”

“A letter?”

Ratoka brought out a letter for me, and upon closer inspection, it was sealed with a seal that I’ve never seen before. It’s different from the church’s seal which I’m familiar with, it was shaped in the form of the letter F instead – and only one person came to my mind, it had to be from that Chief Priest Faris.

When I checked the other side just to make sure, it was clearly addressed to Eliza Kaldia. It seems that there’s no mistake.

“Ratoka. Bring me a letter opener.”

A letter has arrived for me from a priest which I have no particular close relationship with. I sat down in a chair and wondered just what was in the letter, as I sat there staring at it as if it would help me see through it.

I rapped on Ratoka's back when his shoulder drooped in fatigue as he gawked at the extravagant white temple adjacent to the royal palace.

"We're going."

"……That hurt you know!?"

When I put an end to his sulking with a sharp glare, I heard chuckling and guffawing sounds from Claudia who was a few steps behind me dressed in maid attire, as well as Gunther who was also acting as my bodyguard today.

I almost always take Ratoka and Claudia everywhere with me wherever I go these days, but I wonder just why Chief Priest Faris specifically invited the three of them by name to come along with me.

"Why was it these three people……"

I muttered that to myself as I stepped into the dazzling marble temple. That priest especially had no reason to know about Ratoka. Just when and where did the priest learn about it, I wonder if Earl Terejia had informed Faris since they seem to be good friends.

"It's said that Chief Priest Faris has the god's own eyes."

Maybe she heard me muttering to myself, Claudia started chatting about all the information she's heard in town as she's much more caught up on local gossip than I am, on that priest I know nothing about.

"It seems that Faris-dono's mother was from the Melloart royal family, while she herself was the daughter of a duke. There's also a rumor that she used to be Earl Terejia's fiancee, but that's from a really long time ago."

"……Hah?"

Faris is the daughter of a duke, and what's more she used to be engaged to Earl Terejia when they were both much younger? That means that she's probably within ten years of age to Earl Terejia. So she's around seventy, give or take……?

"Yes, she has a rather strange background. You usually don't see someone of such high status entering the church."

"The degree to which it's said her god's eyes can see things, it's impossible to do by the natural laws of the world. Maybe the church unexpectedly does actually have some sort of divine power."

Since I was the only one among us who had ever met Chief Priest Faris directly before, Ratoka and Claudia felt no sort of shock at all at the approximate real age of the priest we were about to meet.

Ratoka aside, if even Claudia doesn't understand Chief Priest Faris's "god's eyes," this priest might really have some sort of mysterious power that I don't comprehend. ……Well, there're very few monks and priests that interact very often within noble social circles, so maybe even a lot of them actually have some sort of divine powers.

– But anyway, god's eyes, eh.

I remembered back to my birthday celebration when I was six years old, to the scales that balanced my good and evil deeds that Chief Priest Faris prepared for me. Even though absolutely nobody should have known about it, my deepest secret was exposed. The other two people there at that time, Kamil and Earl Terejia, also shouldn't have known about it.

Even on the verge of death, Kamil didn't seem to have known that I was the one who ended up inadvertently framing his father.

As for the Earl, I wonder if maybe he knew everything. When I think back on it, that parchment with the list of people that died which appeared on the scale could only have been prepared by him. Neither of us have ever discussed it, but I can infer from it that he must have been informed of the ceremony's contents beforehand.

The remainder of the walk to the specified location inside the temple was done in silence. Although I do feel nervous about what Faris is going to say to me, about having my weakness in her grasp, strangely I didn't feel the same sense of fear that I did last year.

Chapter 87
Talking with the elderly

Shanak Temple – this white temple standing adjacent to the royal palace gave this street of nobles an even more elegant and refined impression than the Grand Temple of Misorua just a little bit further down the street. Commoners also use the Grand Temple though, while this is the center of the street of nobles, so it's mainly nobles, and in particular royals, that use Shanak Temple.

"That was fast. I thought you'd get lost."

In the deepest part of the temple, there was a small church that usually wasn't open to outsiders. Priest Faris who was waiting for us there, greeted us with the same inscrutable, androgynous voice that I remembered.

The temple has the most complex interior structure that I've ever seen. We didn't get lost though, astonishingly enough because Claudia led the way.

"……Is it some sort of wild natural instinct?"

I heard Claudia chuckling slightly from beside me. Although I wasn't exactly praising her just now.

"Yes, her instincts are excellent. Alright, come over here and relax. Today, I just wanted you to have a long talk with the elderly person that I am."

A suspicious smile that I couldn't read appeared on Priest Faris's face, as she indicated towards a chair for me to sit in. Since Claudia is playing the role of my maid today, she pulled it forward for me, and I sat down. Claudia and Ratoka sat down on a sofa placed by the wall, and Faris finally stopped smiling that creepy smile of hers.

– I wonder if she's tired? She's expressionless, and I really can't tell that Faris is around the same age as Earl Terejia. No wait, that's only assuming that Claudia's earlier story about Faris's background was accurate.

"This is to be our third meeting now, young one?"

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Faris stared right into my eyes as I answered her without any hesitation. What is this, I couldn’t help but draw myself back a little. She seems even more evidently eerie than before. Faris squinted at me, as if she was probing the depths of my eyes for something in silence.

“……You’ve absorbed and synchronized fast. I can barely see her anymore. Has it accelerated?”

Faris suddenly muttered something under her breath.

“-Eh?”

It was so unexpected that I had no idea what she was talking about, but Faris ignored my reaction of surprise and continued as if she hadn’t muttered anything at all just now. It seemed like she’d returned to the state she was in the first time we met, with that composed smile of hers as she stared directly into my eyes. Then, the feeling I had earlier that she may be elderly suddenly vanished. Faris really does have an inscrutable gender and age, it gives her an otherworldly, mysterious feeling.

“How’s Siegmund been doing lately? I heard that he’s been getting quite a lot more wrinkles on his face recently.”

Faris started the conversation as if it was a perfectly ordinary one, and I felt myself expelling my breath that I was holding.

“He still hasn’t fully recovered yet. It would be nice if he would get healthy again.”

“Well, humans have limits, it’s only natural that they can’t win against old age. And he’s always been one to push himself unreasonably. Even though that’s not good for him.”

Faris seemed to chuckle from the back of her throat, and her lips curved slightly upwards in the faintest hint of a smile. I don’t know if the story about her once being Earl Terejia’s fiancee is true or not, but it definitely does seem that they have some sort of connection.

“Work is just piling up so much. I would really like for him to make a full recovery and return as well, but……”

“Well, how will it turn out, I wonder. ……We’ve already reached an age where it wouldn’t be strange for either of us to die at any moment.”

That seems to be a rather deep statement. I couldn’t help but take a deep breath at her use of the word “we.” I’m sure that Faris is prepared for death at any moment. Regardless of how mysteriously young she may look on the outside, she’s accepted her old age – along with death.

“Are you feeling tired?”

“No. However, I’m satisfied in life, I am. As for Siegmund, he worries over too many things.”

“If Earl Terejia suddenly passed away, I’m sure he would have many regrets.”

“I’ll bet.”

It’s nothing to laugh over, but it’s also nothing to get shaken over, this is just a solemn story, I think. Even though we’re talking about death, the atmosphere doesn’t seem all that heavy, I wonder if that’s thanks to Faris.

“……The gods will definitely bestow upon my soul the gift of eternal sleep. It will be a pleasure.”

Faris’s eyes once again seemed to probe into mine. Those words passed through my ear canals and reached my brain, without tugging on any emotions, and settled down within my heart.

“If…… Just hypothetically speaking. If your soul wasn’t allowed to rest after death, and was sent back to this world…… What does Faris-dono think of such a thing?”

Before I realized it, the question had already spilled from my mouth. Faris had a child’s look of innocence on her face for an instant, then the smile returned as if to brush away my question. It was a smile of loving kindness, while simultaneously being a smile of pity. It was a beautiful smile just like that of Saint Shanak’s, I was shocked inside that Faris could make such a smile as well.

“The god Misorua does not have the power to revive a soul for a second life. There’s no good luck, bad luck, or destiny, everything is all coincidence. Use your own power

to carve your path in life, grab what you deserve, and struggle, that's all. To your life's utmost limits."

These words from an elderly person, they're so heavy. However, I did obediently calm down. I nodded, and Faris's saint-like smile changed instantly again. Even though it was just the slight inscrutable smile again from earlier, the change in expression was so abrupt that it left me stunned for a short moment. From behind me, I heard Ratoka who had been silent until now moaning faintly.

"Well then, let's cut to the chase and get to the main topic. I didn't invite you here today to deepen your faith in the church, or to hear about how Siegmund has been doing recently."

"Yes, of course."

Probably neither of us have that much free time. There must be some sort of reason that she called me out here today, some sort of use she had for me.

"In every organization, when lots of people gather, there will be differences in opinion, and even factions that appear. The larger the organization, the more apparent the differences will become. Well, it's said that factions appear whenever three or more people gather together."

……Is she talking about the House of Lords, I wonder. There's still some small ongoing conflicts about the matter of the crown prince. Strangely enough, she felt like Earl Terejia whenever he was teaching me something, so I couldn't help but change my attitude and prepare myself to listen.

"It's the same within the church."

However, Faris's statement was so earth shattering and shocking that I was left mouth wide agape and frozen solid.

Chapter 88
Sincere counsel

“Before the Kingdom of Arxia existed in this world, kings and their retainers would marry those from the church, while their children and relatives would be left to the land and the citizens.”

“……Really?”

“Indeed, it’s true. Long ago, the church was responsible for recording the history of countries. Nobody is allowed to tamper with history, we are in charge of protecting history and telling history truthfully as it occurred.”

As Faris nodded her head affirmatively, I thought back to Mrs. Marshan’s history lessons. The origin of nobles, was said to be from when the king recognized his greatest supporters. Thinking back on it, although the lessons were vague, the greatest supporters must have been the church, there’s probably no mistake.

But, considering the power of nobles versus the church today, I must say that it was at least a little hard to believe for a moment. The church is deep-rooted in Arxia, and it shares a common destiny with the country. However, their true power within Arxia is limited. As for their influence, it’s mostly in regards to their responsibilities as keepers of the “law.”

“Of course, it’s fine. The Sacred Code does not prohibit it. Order remains protected.”

However, this time I noticed Faris’s eyebrows becoming slightly furrowed for the first time. I’ve never seen this expression of hers before.

“Currently, there’s some foolish people within the church. They’re disturbing the order and creating chaos, and guiding the country to a path of destruction, and they harbor strong desires and greed even though they swore loyalty to Misorua, the god of Law and Order.”

Faris declared so in a strongly accusing tone of voice, then she moved her line of sight to behind me. When I followed her line of vision, I saw Ratoka sitting there frozen solid. I understood very clearly that Faris was looking at Ratoka in particular.

"……Is there something the matter with my servant?"

"Nothing in particular. However, I believe that your servant knows something about what I am currently discussing."

Somehow Faris's smile gave off a wretched feeling, and Ratoka seemed to shrivel up in fear.

"Faris-dono, my servant was born and raised in a village here in Kaldia. Even in the royal capital, this one never leaves my side. I doubt that this one is involved in any sort of plots regarding our country's destruction."

Even I find this difficult to believe, I don't think there's any reason for Faris to question Ratoka. However, as I covered for him, Ratoka's complexion became even paler. Is it really just like Faris said, does he know something?

My palms began to sweat with impatience. This is bad, I need to calm down. I subtly took a deep breath, trying not to attract anyone's attention.

"Of course, Viscountess Kaldia. I don't believe that your servant is complicit in such a plot either. But, even so, this servant seems to know something about it?"

Faris didn't stop looking directly at Ratoka at all, and in contrast to my impatience, her voice remained relaxed. Without a doubt, Faris seems to be fully confident of it. No, maybe I should say she's somehow confirmed it already?

"In a place called Cyril village of Kaldia, there were some sisters doing supposed missionary work while spreading dangerous ideologies. It happened right in the domain you were born and raised in. Don't you know something about this? 'Elise-dono.'"

……Goosebumps are crawling on my skin. Just what and how much does this priest know? "Elise" as well as which village she came from, that's information that I've kept as tightly under wraps as possible. Even if Earl Terejia has long associated with Faris, I doubt that he would tell Faris, a complete outsider to the Kaldia domain, about such things.

How did this priest know? Does having "god's eyes" have anything to do with this?

"……Urk."

Ratoka seemed to choke while trying to say something. He remained completely frozen solid while his eyes kept darting between me and Faris. He kept gulping and swallowing repeatedly. He kept shaking all over, but finally straightened himself out.

"- As for being born and raised in Kaldia, I believe that I should also be counted."

Faris seemed slightly surprised, and returned her line of vision from Ratoka to me again. Her smile seems to have disappeared. I continued my words with a bit of a refreshed feeling.

"It seems that Faris-dono already knows something regarding this issue of sisters in Kaldia that have been spreading dangerous sentiments under the guise of doing missionary work. Just what additional information could a child of the same age as me provide to you on this matter?"

"……Mmm. It seems that you place quite a lot of trust in your servant, Viscountess Kaldia."

"Indeed. This one is a citizen of my domain. How can I be a proper lord without putting trust in my own citizens?"

Faris blinked several times, then seemed to start grinning. Is that so, she nodded, and her shoulders shaking in laughter helped to dissipate the sense of her overwhelming pressure.

"What you say is quite right. However, I would sincerely advise you to not keep that one by your side."

……Sincere advice, she says? With what she's telling me, as well as the way she's saying it, I feel both uncomfortable and skeptical. Even when I frowned slightly, Faris didn't change her expression.

"It'll become your weakness. If you can't let go of that one, you need to keep a much closer eye on things."

Her voice sounded almost lyrical. However, my stomach felt much, much heavier than before.

"……I'll keep your words in mind."

My words sounded like they were crawling along the ground. I have nothing brilliant to say, no comeback. Why is it that this priest is so good at riling me up?

“Don’t make such a scary face. Right now, you need to be even more cautious and vigilant than before.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“The sisters that were in Cyril village before, seem to be having frequent dealings with the Nordsturms currently.”

【 PART II 】

Chapter 89
Winter and the new citizens, Part 1

Strangely, somehow time went by uneventfully without anything happening at all.

The commotion over choosing the crown prince gradually settled down as well after some time passed. The season for socializing has now ended, and all the nobles that were just so active in the royal capital have each returned to their own domains, since it's difficult to keep a topic going forever no matter how controversial it is.

Although I say that, it hasn't calmed down completely yet. That commotion definitely caused factions to form within the nobility supporting either prince, especially with regards to nobles in the royal palace.

Just like the other nobles, Earl Terejia and I also returned to Kaldia at the end of summer. There seemed to be no movements from the northern nobles that we remained on guard against, nor was there any contact from Faris about the activities of the sisters in the Nordsturm domain. With the usual high amount of work as well as dealing with the autumn harvest, autumn was almost over already before I realized it.

"The snow should be arriving soon……"

"Ahh, is it already this time of year? One year sure went by fast."

It's now the last month of August, and the air in Kaldia has a chilly bite to it, snow should be arriving at any moment. Regardless of the calendar date, when snow arrives, that means winter is here.

Ever since I've returned to the Mansion of Golden Hills from the royal capital, I've had virtually no time to even leave, every day has been hectic with sending out letters, compiling information and reports, writing documents, learn from Mrs. Marshan's lectures, work with Earl Terejia, or practicing the bow and sword…… Well, that's how I spent every day, so it's no wonder that an entire season passed before I noticed.

I've been spending every day so habitually like this that I didn't even realize how exhausted my body was until now, so I sighed lightly. It became a white mist that quickly dissipated in the chilly air.

I'm currently wrapped in a thick woolen cloak, and riding east together with Claudia by horse. Before a full-fledged winter gets here, I need to check on the state of the village for the new citizens.

"You don't seem to have any ambition or aspirations at all right now, Alicia-dono. You're probably feeling tired? You should take a rest and relax a bit at Teo's."

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono."

"Mm, sorry."

"……I suppose you're right. I am a little tired."

I was so tired that I didn't even have the energy to pretend I wasn't as I nodded to Claudia. She also seemed to be slightly fatigued as she replied, of course you are.

Ever since Earl Terejia started feeling unwell earlier this summer, he hasn't gotten much better. Of course, I can't let the work he usually does be not done, so I've gotten a lot more familiar with his work.

No matter how hard I work, I can't do everything by myself, so I've left all military work related to the domain up to Claudia, Gunther, and the oldest soldier in the army, Calvin. Unfortunately, Gunther and Calvin basically don't know how to read or write, so all the documents are left up to Claudia.

Also unexpectedly, Claudia has gotten quite busy as well, she's basically taken over the role of army instructor from Earl Terejia. Not only does she teach the army personal combat techniques, she's also sharp in tactics and strategy. It seems that she's extremely skilled at everything military.

It's clear to see that both of us are overworked. It's hard because I lack people I can use.

"It's hurts that 'Elise' isn't here right now……"

Even though I know there's nothing I can do about it, I couldn't help but let that comment slip out.

"Well, he was brainwashed before. It can't be helped."

Claudia seemed to make an attempt at consoling me. "Elise" – or Ratoka, I've been keeping him far away from the other Elise this autumn, as well as keeping him under surveillance. The Nordsturms seem to be connected to the group of sisters that planted anti-nobility sentiments in him in the past. They might find out about Ratoka's existence and take advantage of him somehow to slip through a crack in our defenses. That's why I'm on guard.

I know. I was the one who came up with, and carried out the idea to confine him. Even so, I can't keep a hold on my emotions.

Is this, any different from what I did to Kamil?

"……"

"……Eliza-dono?"

I shook my head to try and clear it of these dark emotions.

"……Nothing. On our return tomorrow, I was thinking about staying at Nezu village."

"Ahh, those girls. It's good that the wounds in their hearts are healing."

Claudia nodded, and our conversation ended there. We traveled the rest of the way in silence.

"My lord! You've finally arrived."

At the entrance to the new village, Teomer was standing there and greeted us, waving his left hand. Claudia and I both waved our hands as well in greeting.

"Hey, Teo. It's been a while. How are the preparations for winter going?"

“Long time no see. I see that you barely have any energy just like usual. As for winter preparations…… It’s going well, is what I would have liked to say.”

Looking at him, Teomer’s skin seems to be considerably tanner than before after spending an entire summer in Kaldia. He used to be a little reddish, but now he’s closer to the color of wheat.

“The irrigation work isn’t as far along as I expected.”

Teomer gave me a brief report as we entered the village gate. There’s no other villages close by to here, but we did have a wall built around the village for crime prevention.

When I entered the village, I saw several inelegant stone buildings, with only the foundations built. Similarly, there were also only a few paths that had been paved with stone, and their own self-made nomad tents as well as the simple tents donated from other domains were lined up all over the place.

This is the current situation in the village for the new citizens. I see six more buildings than when I was here last time and had to go to the royal capital. However, this isn’t enough for six hundred villagers to live in. Originally these buildings are meant for about five people to live in, and right now double that number is living in each building. Even so, there’s still about four hundred people still currently living in tents.

“Right now, we’re having the children and elderly live in the ‘buildings’ and our own tents, but……”

“It’s unreasonable to pass winter in Kaldia with only tents. Since you’ve taken all this trouble to become my citizens, I can’t have you all dying and going to visit Misorua in less than one year.”

When it’s spring in this area, melted snow from the Amon Nor mountains will cause the water levels of lakes and rivers to overflow and even flood. That’s why we have to elevate the level of buildings we construct here, and we’re doing flood control work at the Sera River and the surrounding lakes, but since there’s many people among the new citizens that aren’t suited for labor work like children and the elderly, in addition to the fact that they aren’t used to doing this type of work, it seems that things have been progressing slower than expected. On top of all this, this village is the farthest one from the Mansion of Golden Hills, as well as being located far away from other villages. It’s risky to have such an isolated and ramshackle village face the deep snow of winter in Kaldia by itself.

“……Alright. I’m sorry, but let’s have all the new citizens stay in the area under direct control for this winter.”

Chapter 90
Winter and the new citizens, part 2

After confirming with Teo that his tribe would agree to spend winter in the area under direct control, there were no more big projects for the time being. I spent the rest of the day on listening to how people's lives were, what basic necessities were insufficient, learning who was sick and injured, learning all the finer details to the best of my limits. Based on all of this, I need to decide on what needs to be purchased and what Lord Carson's carpenters should work on first, next spring when they arrive. As soon as I get back to the mansion, I need to talk to Bellway about it all as well.

For dinner, I asked them to make me whatever they usually ate, and for lodging I just asked to stay in one of their simple buildings with some other children. My new citizens that have very little concept of a nobility system and the difference in rank between commoners and nobles accepted readily.

The meal that night consisted of pumpkins, boiled fish from the river, horse milk, some vegetables mixed with fish, and a cheese soup. The pumpkin's texture was smoother than I thought it would be, and not as sweet as I expected, but still delicious. Although everything I described seemed normal, it tastes like they probably put cheese into every dish. Since they keep a small herd of goats, they must also have some way of obtaining citrus fruits for the acidity necessary in the process of making goat cheese. Now that wild fruits have been lost to Kaldia, even cheese is considered quite a luxury item.

"So this is a pumpkin. How delicious! It's a vegetable with such a rich taste!"

"Indeed."

Claudia seemed to really like the pumpkins. She took the second serving offered to her in silence with a stuffed mouth and an expression full of joy.

Later in the evening, I listened to children the same age as me tell stories about fishing and hunting, and I think I strangely fell asleep for the first time in my life while chatting excitedly without having to think about anything difficult at all. I thought that it was actually just pure and fun. To the extent where I felt a little lonely the next morning.

“My lord!? Wh, what……?”

When I returned to stay at Nezu village, the mayor’s wife was so shocked…… Or maybe I should say she was terrified. Well, I guess I did visit unannounced, so it can’t be helped.

“Ahh, sorry for surprising you. ……I came to see those girls from before, I just happened to stop by here after a trip to the village for my new citizens.”

“Those, uh, girls?”

I confirmed it again for the mayor who still seemed to be puzzled. After I nodded, they hurriedly tried to have those girls summoned right away, while I rushed as well to stop them.

“C, call them here immediately!”

“Wait, you don’t need to call them here to see me. I’ll go visit them myself.”

Those two village girls seemed to be regaining their energy despite a lingering fear of men. Although they couldn’t do any work in the fields or heavy labor, it seemed like they were maintaining the agricultural tools, making ropes, and taking care of some chickens.

I didn’t have the time to chat with as many villagers as possible like in the village under construction, so after I asked some villagers about their winter preparations, I continued on my way back to the mansion. It’s already been five years since Earl Terejia’s become my guardian and begun enacting his policies in Kaldia, it seems that life is returning here little by little. I wonder if it’s about time that we can begin producing cloths and threads on our own again without having to rely on imports.

It might be fine to purchase some goats from Henznaut domain next year. Or maybe if the new citizens’ goats do really well and increase in number, I can buy some from them. I have to revive technologies and techniques in Kaldia.

With new citizens' tents were lined up on a hill north of the Mansion of Golden Hills, I saw the sight of clear skies after the first snow of winter for the first time. Although Earl Terejia had told me about how it looked last year, I missed it back then. At that time I was busy with work as well as recuperating from my long sleep, so I hardly stepped out of the mansion.

Now I can avoid having the new citizens being forced to deal with unfamiliar weather and an unfamiliar land all by themselves. There's many elderly and children among them, and in a new land with different customs, they'll reach a high level of dissatisfaction quickly if I don't do anything for them.

That's not all though, there's also benefits to having them here. The largest village in all of Kaldia, Claria village, which is located south of the area under direct control, seems to be interested trading with the new citizens as well as learning about their culture. Although Claria village is fairly close to the area under direct control, it happened to be the village least affected by my father's rampage, and it was also the village where Earl Terejia's aid reached first. A lot of soldiers in training come from this village, and the regular Kaldia army also has many soldiers with family members in this village, so anti-noble sentiments are quite weak here. Also, since there's a lot of commoners from other domains that end up staying here if they visit Kaldia, it's a place that's also friendly to the new citizens.

"Last year, we traded our pumpkins, livestock, dairy products, and cloths for things like bread, eggs, straw, rye, and so on. I think some people also got cooking utensils."

According to Teo, it seems that bartering is something their tribe does often. As for some of the older Kaldia citizens that experienced life before my father's despotic rule, it seems that cheese was what they wanted the most. It seems that there's a few words in common between the Artolan language and some words from ancient times in the Jugfena region, so they've been able to communicate with each other at a basic level.

"If possible, please actively trade this year. Claria village is well populated, and things of all sorts gather there, it also has a lot of contact with the other villages. It's the most appropriate location for you guys to be accepted by the villagers."

I also chatted with Teo about how his tribe was spending winter as I helped him corral the horses in a simple wooden fence that my soldiers had helped construct. Although the Shiru horses are smaller in size than my army's horses, it seems that they're quite compact and muscular all over with excellent stamina. Although they're trained, they

still have wild temperaments and it was a bit difficult for me to get through the fence as I wasn't used to them.

"But at the moment we can't afford to sell any of our livestock, nor are we able to produce cheese."

"……I believe I can have lemons imported. Would you be able to make at least a little cheese? In exchange, how about providing you an additional ten goats in the spring?"

At any rate, if I buy goats for my domain, the Shiru tribe would be the best at taking care of them anyways. I also intend to give some goats to Claria village and Nezu village where they already have the ability to take care of livestock again, but since I'm buying a new type of goat for the first time, I want to let the Shiru tribe handle the goats first and hopefully be able to pass down some techniques on goat handling.

"Ten goats, eh…… Alright, I'll have a word with the other chiefs about this."

"You're a great help. Also, will you go and see the cavalry troops sometime this year?"

"Ahh, that won't be a problem. Also, you should be there as well, can you participate? How else will you lead if you don't know how to handle a horse and form battle formations?"

Although my newly established cavalry troops from last year are guided by retired cavalry troops from Earl Ruktoferd's domain, the instructors return to Ruktoferd for the duration of winter. And so this time, I'm hoping to improve my cavalry's efficiency by having the Shiru tribe that's used to being on horseback year-round observe their training. It seems that there's some fundamental differences in how to handle their horses.

"Even though it's winter, as long as life has stabilized for the tribe, it should be fine to have some warriors join the army……"

"Is that really fine? Aren't they considered an important existence to protect the tribe?"

"No, now my people are currently protected by you, not our warriors. Didn't you also pick up the path of the warrior, in order to protect our pride?"

Teo was grinning devilishly as he said so. Indeed, it's as he says.

"……I suppose. There's no problem with treating you as my private soldiers."

"Use us well. You're our King now."

–Mmm??

I heard myself being addressed as something that I'm almost sure I misheard, but I decided to ignore it. Maybe to them the position above that of their chief is simply their King. That's probably all it is.

Chapter 91
To kill him or let him live, which is my true intention?

As a traditional stone building constructed in my great-grandfather's time, the Mansion of Golden Hills gets quite chilly in winter. In rooms without a fireplace, the cold feels like it can pierce down to your bones, and the floors and walls are icy cold as well.

Of course, the dungeon with no functions for warmth installed in it whatsoever is even colder. While there are some small holes drilled in the dungeon leading to the ground for ventilation, it seems that the dungeon is actually even colder during winter than our storage facilities.

There's quite some strong wind drafts in winter, and the fires lighting up the dungeon were weakened significantly by it. I clasped my thick fur cloak tightly around my body as I descended deep into the dungeon, listening to the sound of someone rattling the iron bars.

"What's wrong, you're causing such a commotion?"

"Let me out of here! Please! I'll freeze and die……"

The painfully distressed voice coming from the other side of the iron bars was one of the two prisoners I had secretly kept for myself and put in here earlier this summer, a blonde-haired bandit with a tall, lanky body. His light clothes didn't do very much to ward off the cold, and he was shivering. His originally blonde hair was also changing to a muddy hue of dirty blonde, becoming matted with filth.

"Shut up…… Don't do something like beg for your life……!"

From the adjacent cell, the other bandit, the first one I interrogated, was shouting weakly in anger with all his remaining strength. It seems that since he's middle-aged, it's taken a harder toll on his body. I wonder if the blonde bandit is shivering more because of the cold or because of everything that's happened to the other bandit. When I just stood there silently without saying anything to either of them, the blonde

bandit turned around and started yelling at the other bandit in frustration and impatience.

“You shut up! If you want to die so much, go die by yourself!! I…… don’t want to freeze to death here!”

“You bastard…… Have you forgotten your loyalty to our gods…..!?”

“Who cares about that!!”

The blonde man was smacking the iron bars. It seems that after being imprisoned for so long, his spirit was finally giving in to the cold of winter and the threat of losing his life.

“Hey, I’ll tell you anything…… Anything at all…… Help me, please let me out of here…… My feet, my feet hurt so much I can’t bear it……!”

His feet hurting so much that he can’t bear it, he’s probably talking about frostbite. Since I didn’t give them any shoes or socks, it seems that his feet developed frostbite first, before his fingers. It’s now been seven days since the first snow of winter, and temperatures have dropped harshly. His injuries have probably already undergone necrosis.

“……I see. Sure, it’s fine. If you tell me everything you know, I’ll let you out of there. I’ll also have your feet treated.”

I think I sound terribly similar to a cat right now. I can even feel myself licking my lips for once.

“Really!?!?”

“Of course. To be honest, I can’t afford to keep taking care of people that take too long to decide anyways.”

As the blonde man shouted in elation, the other bandit was moaning with an anger-filled voice.

“What’s, this! How can this be!!”

“You just shut up!!”

“You bastard, are you this shameless!”

I merely watched silently and observed as both men lost all their self-control and shouted angrily at each other. It doesn’t seem like they are acting. I ignored their continued arguing, and had my soldiers take the blonde bandit out of his jail cell.

“Valon! Don’t go!!”

Finally, the door to the dungeon closed, leaving behind the sorrowful cries of the remaining bandit. I told my soldiers that were helping the blonde bandit named Valon to stand to take him to the interrogation room in the barracks, while I went upstairs to call for Rashiok.

On the third floor, I found Rashiok sleeping in front of Ratoka’s room. Why is he here, I wonder. Because I’m self-conscious about having Ratoka placed under house arrest again, I’ve been avoiding him these days. What I will say to him, what he might say back to me, it’s only natural that I have no idea what to tell him.

On the day that I talked with Chief Priest Faris, I had Ratoka return to the Mansion of Golden Hills immediately without listening to any of his excuses.

Last winter, after I woke up from an entire month of sleeping, Ratoka had told me in detail why he’d thrown a rock at me. The story according to Ratoka seemed to be that ever since his birth, his mother had gone insane and constantly abused him, and he also picked up a hatred of the nobility from the villagers, which developed into a killing intent against the domain lord. His story had never mentioned anything about sisters planting the seeds of anti-noble sentiments.

That’s why I judged things to be dangerous. There’s many people gathered in the royal capital. I was worried about the risk of those sisters who seem to be connected to the Nordsturms somehow finding Ratoka again and “reusing” him in some way.

Ratoka never mentioned the sisters since he didn’t have any suspicions towards their activities – also, because Ratoka didn’t want to mention any of his memories involving his personal emotions. Meaning, there’s a definite crack in Ratoka’s spirit from which the sisters can slip into and potentially take advantage of.

But even if I tell that to Ratoka right now, he wouldn’t be able to understand the truth behind my actions. All I can do is, keep away from him, and keep him safe and protected while also keeping him under house arrest.

……Of course, this is just what I'm telling myself.

It's obvious that my emotions might not agree with what I'm doing. Honestly, I truly don't want to do such a thing to him.

Rashiok made a sound of surprise in his throat at seeing the look of self-loathing in my eyes. While draconis are highly intelligent, they don't have as many complicated things to think about like humans do, so they express their emotions simply.

If you don't want to be hated by Ratoka, then just don't do anything that Ratoka would hate you for, it's just that simple, is what Rashiok's eyes seemed to be trying to tell me.

Chapter 92
Piercing words

I intended for Rashiok to be there alongside me at the interrogation of the blond bandit Valon. That man isn't used to the existence of such a large beast. Rashiok's presence alone should be enough to terrify and fluster him greatly.

However, Rashiok wouldn't move from his position in front of Ratoka's room. Since he's much bigger than I am, no matter how much I pushed him, he wouldn't budge. This rascal, I kept calling him various names mentally. I couldn't help myself and suddenly remembered a wide variety of colorful and vulgar swear words from my previous life. I glared at the draconis laying there casually, taking up most of the entire corridor while wagging his serpentine tail back and forth.

Will I have to give up on bringing Rashiok with me? I don't absolutely have to have Rashiok with me at the interrogation. The bandit's spirit had already been weakened by the cold to the point that he was begging for his life. I thought about it and figured I could also use various other methods if I had to return the bandit to the dungeon, so I let go of Rashiok and was about to leave.

……At that moment, I fell flat on my face in the hallway. I'm feeling an intense pain and heat from my nose right now. Thanks to the carpet flooring, it didn't hurt as much as it could have, but it still hurt. More importantly, there's something else. There's a terrible pressure on my back. I'm pretty sure it's Rashiok's front paw. I can also hear his breathing really close to me, so his face is probably close to me. He also seems to be holding onto the edge of my cloak so that I couldn't stand back up, and he was the one who made me fall over, what a rascal.

I raised my face a little and pressed my hand against my nose, feeling a warm liquid trickling down. My nose is bleeding.

"……Rashiok."

I managed to utter his name the best I could with my face to the ground, but the weight on my back wouldn't disappear. I grudgingly wiped my nosebleed a little with my sleeve rather than letting it drip. While my clothes are rather expensive, the carpet is even more so.

Then, a small figure started coming up the stairs. It's Ratoka, holding a book under his arm. What timing.

"Eh…… Huh?"

Ratoka seemed to be more confused than anything else. Of course he would be. I could only imagine how different I looked from usual, with my nose bleeding as I'm laying flat against the floor with Rashiok's paw pressing me down.

"……Um, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Hearing the frustration in my voice, Ratoka hurriedly came over and knocked on Rashiok's head a few times as he was still sitting on top of me. Then finally, the weight casually disappeared from my back.

That bastard. Once again, I cursed at Rashiok mentally. So this was his aim to begin with.

"Uh…… For the time being, let's stop your nosebleed."

With an indescribable expression on his face, Ratoka opened the door to his room.

There was a bed, a desk, a chest of drawers, and a bookshelf with some papers and books on it. In the year since this room had become Ratoka's, nothing had changed except that there was now a bookshelf. It's only natural since I haven't given him any other furniture nor a salary. However, looking around the room while sitting on his bed, I couldn't help but feel that his room seemed so wide and empty and a little cold, and I wondered if I should give him a sofa.

"Here, a cloth to stem your nosebleed."

Ratoka's mouth was bent into the shape of the ㅅ character as he looked to see how I was doing. As soon as he saw that I was still holding my nose with my tunic's sleeve, he took out a clean cotton cloth for me from the first aid kit on his shelf and also opened the window in his room for me to get some fresh air. I obediently sat still for a while, and my nosebleed naturally stopped bleeding on its own. The pain from face planting is also fading. But if I leave right now, I have a feeling that Rashiok will do the same thing to me all over again.

I was momentarily confused over what to say, but I ended up asking:

“How is Elise-sama doing?”

“She had a small seizure earlier today, and she’s now resting. Lately she’s been having seizures more and more often. Even though she’s been getting fevers less often than before, in this past year……”

Ratoka hasn’t had any work to do while Elise had been sleeping. He seems to be passing the time by reading books, and he just happened to have gotten a new book to read when he returned to his room. Like Ratoka said, when Elise first came here, she often did nothing but sleep as she lacked physical fitness and would always be getting fevers, but after staying a while in the more temperate climate of Kaldia, her physical condition improved and she was no longer bedridden like before. That’s why I furrowed my eyebrows at the report that her seizures have become more common again.

“The doctor is examining the current situation, but it also seems like Elise herself agrees that she’s getting worse.”

“Please encourage her as much as possible. I’ll do what I can to visit her whenever possible as well.”

Elise’s seizures are also greatly influenced by her state of mind. If she feels weak mentally, she’ll have more seizures.

“Please do that. Ever since you’ve put me here again, you haven’t visited Elise even once.”

“……Is that so.”

It’s Ratoka that I wanted to avoid, not Elise, but since Ratoka is still in charge of dealing with Elise for me, I’ve been avoiding Elise’s room as well. I’ve been making the excuse to myself that I’m too busy with work to go see her, but actually I’m feeling quite guilty about not going to chat with her. When I just nodded without saying anything else, Ratoka just stared at me.

“……I can’t even be myself and I have to use someone else’s name, I’m not allowed to use my own.”

His voice was strangely cold. I looked again at Ratoka in surprise. He seemed to be expressionless, nothing but ice.

“Do you not even need me anymore?”

He almost spat that at me, then he seemed to awkwardly deride himself.

“……The fact that you didn’t kill me, I know that I’m supposed to be grateful and not think about it. But I’ve always been wondering. Just why you went to the trouble of giving me an education, and keeping me by your side. It seems that you like me quite a bit. Are you just spoiling me?”

“That’s not it.”

Despite me saying so, I was in doubt of myself. I could see what Ratoka is saying. Even I was slightly aware of it, that I had sealed off my emotions this past year.

“I don’t think I’m wrong. I think you’re overlapping me with Kamil.”

My throat froze up. Even though I wanted to tell him to stop, I couldn’t say anything.

“You’re just using me as that guy’s replacement.”

My head feels hot. Various emotions are running through me to the point that my hands are shaking. My vision is flickering.

He knows. Better than I do myself, he’s seen into the inner workings of my heart better than I have.

“-Ah,”

A tiny sound escaped from the back of my throat. At that same moment, someone knocked on the door to Ratoka’s room.

Chapter 93
My current answer

“Eliza, ‘Elise.’ Are you both here?”

“……Earl Terejia? Yes, Eliza-sama is currently here.”

Since I was currently unable to respond to anything right now, Ratoka replied for me. A tired-looking Earl Terejia quietly opened the door and came in for some reason together with Rashiok. It seems like Rashiok is gently nudging Earl Terejia. Maybe that’s why the Earl appears slightly confused.

“……Is something, the matter. Earl Terejia.”

A terrible sounding voice came out of me. It seems that I’m still quite shaken. Earl Terejia turned towards me, and suddenly raised his eyebrow.

“……No, I want to know what’s going on as well. Rashiok brought me over here.”

“Rashiok did?”

“That’s right. ……Something like this happened before as well. The day of that battle at Fort Jugfena.”

Rashiok, the subject of our discussion, was merely sitting in front of the door. Is this to make sure that nobody can leave? I think he wants us to talk things out. While the three of us remained confused, Rashiok suddenly howled.

We just kept looking at each other for a while. Finally, Earl Terejia was the first one to speak up.

“Shall we just chat for a little while in front of the door like this?”

Ratoka was licking his lips nervously. I also felt really awkward as well. We had just been talking about a topic which neither of us wanted a third party to hear.

“I think that what ‘Elise’ said earlier wasn’t wrong at all. Eliza, you have indeed been overlapping ‘Elise’ with Kamil.”

It’s impossible for me to insist on that not being the case anymore if even the Earl is saying so. I can only admit to it. I nodded bitterly, while the Earl continued speaking.

“I haven’t seen you too much these days recently, but I can still tell. You’re afraid of repeating the same thing with Kamil’s death all over again.”

– I felt like my vision had just cracked into two pieces like a shattered mirror. Something that I didn’t want to know, didn’t want to hear, even more so than that I was overlapping Ratoka and Kamil with each other, was being said by Earl Terejia.

“The same thing?”

“Aye. You couldn’t place your trust in someone, and as a result he died. And now, you’ve become afraid of trusting others. Isn’t that right, Eliza?”

As an old man, his gaze is quite sharp. However, there was no emotion expressed in his eyes. Not anger, not pity, nothing. I felt like all my strength left my body, and I collapsed onto the bed. I was afraid of meeting Ratoka’s eyes. I covered my eyes with one arm, and took deep breaths.

“……Yes. That’s right.”

Once again, I have no choice other than to admit this as well.

“If even Claudia-dono didn’t notice anything, I didn’t think anyone else would. As expected, you know me very well, Earl Terejia.”

The earl didn’t reply to my words.

“Even so, I didn’t even know it myself until you told it to me so directly. I probably didn’t want to see or think about it myself.”

Even though I know it’s unseemly, my voice was trembling. On the contrary though, I think it would be funny if I could speak normally right now.

“……What do you mean?”

My shoulder couldn't help but jump at Ratoka's sudden voice. I wasn't able to read his emotions from just his voice alone.

This time I smiled at myself in self-deprecation.

"I thought that it was meaningless to trust people, until Kamil died. Actually, it might be better to say that I was being unreasonable. At any rate, the earl meant the thing about me being unable to trust people."

Ratoka was looking directly at me. – In his eyes, I saw disdain.

"Just like the earl said, in the end Kamil died because I couldn't trust him. When we were confused by the baboon magical beast pretending to imitate a human voice, Kamil protected me and ended up dying. ……But if it hadn't been for me not trusting him, he probably wouldn't have ended up dying."

"……Then, are you now thinking about doing the opposite and relying on people more instead?"

"Ahh, that's right."

I nodded, while Ratoka closed his eyes. He's taking deep breaths. He's deeply furrowing his eyebrows, and I can see him clenching his fists tightly and attempting to suppress his emotions.

"-Is that so."

That was all he squeezed out of himself. It was such a cold voice. It made me feel like I was looking into a mirror, talking to a reflection of myself. His behavior where he's freezing his emotions and that icy voice, it strangely resembles me.

Suddenly Ratoka turned his back on me. Rashiok standing in front of the door stepped aside. Ratoka quietly left the room now that the path to the door was now clear. Earl Terejia who had remained silent while watching us let out a sigh.

"As always, being so difficult."

"……"

“At any rate, since I was obviously summoned here for something, I felt like I had to speak up and say something about how I saw things, forgive me.”

“……No need to say sorry. Please excuse Rashiok for his actions.”

At any rate, if the earl hadn’t spoken up, probably all three of us would have ended up leaving the room without saying anything. Maybe it would have come out of me someday if we had just continued waiting in silence, but neither the earl nor I have the free time for that.

After Earl Terejia left the room, only Rashiok and I remained. Rashiok approached me and laid down at my feet. His ears and tail were drooping, and he was looking at me with a gentle expression.

“……I’m not angry at you, you know.”

Rashiok nudged my feet with his nose as I spoke those words lacking in any energy.

“Oi! I thought that you were supposed to help me if I told you everything I know!!”

The bandit in the interrogation room was crying and screaming. According to the soldiers, he had been shouting for all this time. It seems that at first he had tried to beat down the door, but since it was too painful to do so, now all he was doing was shouting.

“Did he say anything useful?”

I had asked Gunther and Claudia to take charge after I had him moved to the interrogation room. I was told by my soldiers that the moment he entered the interrogation room again, the bandit voluntarily started offering information on the bandit group’s goal.

“……It seems that they were going to meet up with a certain woman, in order to assist her.”

“A woman?”

“It seems that her name is Diferis. She’s currently in the Ogren domain. It’s a domain located in the heart of the Nordsturms’ seat of power.”

Chapter 94
Promise with a demon

When I interrogated the bandit Valon based on what Claudia and Gunther had just told me, it didn't seem like he hid anything at all, there was nothing that seemed overly suspicious and he immediately told me anything I asked him.

He said that he came to Arxia to fulfill a mission given to him by his church.

He said that his mission was to meet with a woman named Diferis waiting in the Ogren domain, and to assist her.

He said that some people in the bandit group, himself included, believed in the West Alfena sect of the Revua church, and that the church that had given them their mission was the West Alfena church.

He said that the believers were nobles from the Densel Dukedom.

He said that the rest were real bandits, hired by the nobles.

He said that the woman named Diferis was making large amounts of generous donations to the West Alfena church.

He said that he was told to go through the Kaldia domain in order to reach the Ogren domain.

It's been about half a year since I caught the bandits, but this is the first time that I've heard all these things.

"What was Diferis going to have you guys do?"

"Well, I don't really know the details. I think it would probably be some anti-Arxian related activities."

Anti-Arxian activities, eh…… What I kept thinking about was of course, the suspicious movements of the Nordsturms, and those sisters that keep coming and going from their domain. Especially since those sisters are spreading anti-noble sentiments, they're a dangerous factor that could undermine order in Arxia.

I believe that Marquis Nordsturm's wife is from the Ogren domain. It would be natural to consider the Ogren domain complicit in their suspicious movements.

"Then, is the Western Alfena church intending to invade Arxia? Or perhaps destroy Arxia?"

"Of course, to destroy it. Since this is an infidel's country based on the Xia sect…… Well, that's what fanatics like my cellmate Remis believe in. I'm different. Well, my parents are believers, but I only joined the church for money. Since, I can make a profit. Just like Diferis, there are many both inside and outside of Densel that wish for Arxia's destruction and will give us a great deal of funding."

According to Valon, that's why he was willing to talk now since he was afraid of dying, as he wasn't a fanatic believer like the rest of them were.

It seems that the other man still in the dungeon is named Remis. Well, since he's going to be nothing but a frozen corpse soon, I no longer hold any interest in him.

But anyways, all of this got me thinking. If what Valon says is true, the Western Alfena church is basically a church in name only, and is actually more like some sort of anti-Arxian terrorist organization or group. What's more, it has many supporters.

"If that's the goal of your church, their supporters' goal must be very easy to understand."

"……Ahh, indeed. Other than the fanatics among them, it's mostly merchants that are donating money, as well as some nobles. There are some merchants that are aiming for control over regional products found in Arxia's vassal states, and there are also many weapon and drug dealers. Also, the nobles want to expand their territories."

Meaning, these people would benefit if war broke out. The merchants aim to profit from war, or to take control over some of Arxia's vassal states, so they're investing in a terrorist organization. Since their nobles want Arxia's land, it's also advantageous for them to invest in terrorists so that Arxia is already weakened before any actual war breaks out.

……Also, nobles from my own country, the Nordsturms, might be involved in all this. It feels like some hot, passionate feelings are beginning to bubble up from within me, slowly coming to a boil.

“But, if your church is up to such large undertakings, I would have expected the name to be a little more famous.”

“The Western Alfena church is only a small sect, a tiny church. Since the original Revua religion that it’s under is so large, it’s like they’re hiding under an umbrella.”

……Unlike the Xia religion in Arxia, the Revua religion has several major sects. However, since it’s structured so that there’s many small sects under each one, it’s indeed difficult to gather information on the smaller churches. None of the main churches should have a name containing either of the words “Western” or “Alfena.” It’s impossible to investigate. There’s too many small churches to possibly find out about them all. It’s especially difficult to learn about one if it’s so small in scale that it’s only known to locals.

While I was thinking in my mind without saying anything out loud, Valon also waited for me silently for a while. But while I was in the middle of my thoughts, I heard his voice again.

“Do all Arxian children have such disturbingly high intellect?”

“……Well, who knows.”

“You don’t even look like you’re ten yet. If you had been born in Densel, it wouldn’t be strange at all if you were considered to be possessed by a demon and killed off.”

Well, if he had seen how I was when I had just been born in Arxia, he probably would have considered me a demon from an even earlier age. But anyways, he continued speaking.

I noticed that I couldn’t help but furrow my eyebrows again. The Xia religion doesn’t have the concept of demons, but in the Romur Ringwall languages used in the eastern countries, it’s a commonly used word there. Due to my memories from a previous life, it’s a word that’s easy for me to understand.

That's why I had a reaction. Thanks to the standards of my previous life's memories, I'd always considered the actions of the unscrupulous Kaldia family to be the "work of demons."

"Demon…… Eh."

Then I considered the words I was about to tell this man. They're definitely words that won't put the Kaldia family name to shame, the work of demons.

"I understand everything clearly now. I shall keep my promise with you."

"-Really!"

He seemed delighted at the news, while I smiled slightly at him in return.

"Yes, of course."

I stood up. At the same time, I had the two soldiers to the left and right of Valon restrain his arms, and force him down from his chair and kneel in front of me. I took a slender sword from Gunther who was behind me, and held its tip to Valon's throat.

"……Eh?"

His smile froze. That was his final word. My slender sword sliced above his clavicles, right through the soft fleshy part of his throat and exited close to his cervical vertebrae. Immediately after, reddish-brown blood started flowing from his mouth, and covered the floor.

"I forgot to tell you, but you're already dead now. Meaning, only dead people are going to leave my dungeon."

His eyelids were blinking furiously and he kept sputtering blood, while his lips moved like he wanted to say something. No voice came out, but his lips were moving so tremendously that I felt as if he was being driven by demons.

Well, things are like this already. Eliza Kaldia was cursed from the moment she was born into this world.

I had never intended in the first place to ever release any of the bandits. They hurt my people and committed crimes. It's only natural that they should die in compensation.

Chapter 95
Despite my grief, I was unable to take that hand

"Eliza-sama, it's time for dinner."

The voice surprised me. During this afternoon, I was staying in my room, working on finishing all the paperwork, but I seem to have gotten too absorbed in working. When I raised my head, I felt a dull sensation on my back and neck. It seems that I've been working for too long without rest. Since there's a lack of sunlight during winter, I'm always using candles, and I noticed that it had almost burned all the way down.

"Ahh – thank you very much, Mrs. Hortensia."

My new nanny, Mrs. Hortensia, was the person standing in front of the door who had called me. It seems that she came all the way to my room to call me as I wasn't coming out. It was already completely dark outside, and she had a lamp in her hand. The lamplight was flickering, reflecting off of her eyes.

"I'll get going right now."

After carefully putting my quill pen back in its pen stand so that the ink wouldn't run or spill, I stood up. Mrs. Hortensia entered my room, and she began helping me put on my robe to replace my coat. While the inside of my room is kept warm by a hearth which had a heating system that could send warm air to my room through a central fireplace, the corridors didn't have that system.

"……Eliza-sama."

Just as Mrs. Hortensia helped me button up the last button of my robe, she suddenly started speaking to me. She had a relaxed smile, and was looking at me with a gentle look in her eyes.

"Eliza-sama is a splendid person. You work your hardest to try and fulfill your duties as a domain lord."

She took my hand and wrapped both her hands around mine. She still smiled softly at me when she saw my surprise, and she began talking slowly as if trying to persuade me.

“But, before any of that, Eliza-sama is still a child. Even though you have the position of an adult, you shouldn’t treat yourself as if you were an adult.”

She was basically treating me just like a child.

“……I can’t do that.”

My thoughts were bitter as I muttered that out loud. Mrs. Hortensia’s words were warm and soft, just like a spring breeze. They suddenly invaded my dry, cracked heart.

That was why, it was so bitter. It was scary. I felt like I wanted to get rid of this feeling that I wasn’t used to.

A piece of firewood from my fireplace snapped with a loud crackle. However, Mrs. Hortensia never looked away from me at all, almost as if she didn’t hear it.

“No. You must realize that you are still a child, and treat yourself accordingly.”

She was so direct with me. Even though her gaze seemed gentle, it was also strong. This was scary.

“Eliza-sama. It is true that when Earl Terejia hired me, he did instruct me to treat you as an adult. However, you are still a child. I am certain that because nobody treats Eliza-sama as a child, that is why you are always so busy having to think about difficult things.”

“……Stop, please.”

I could hear myself clenching my teeth.

It was as if there was a voice screaming in the back of my head to not listen to her, to not let her say anything more. It was difficult to breathe. I felt as if I was being choked by something soft like cotton.

“In this mansion, it’s an unfortunate thing that there’s nobody here who knows how to raise children. That’s why nobody knows how to just let Eliza-sama have fun and relax. Anyone that used to treat Eliza-sama as a child is no longer here.”

Mrs. Hortensia’s tone of voice was invading me with such warmth and affection that it was breaking me into pieces. This time she took her hands that were wrapped around mine, and placed them on my shoulders.

This was no good. I couldn’t let this go on any further. The innermost part of my mind was screaming at me.

I wanted to escape from here. Despite thinking so, I couldn’t move at all. Her arms enveloped me while I stood so still as if I had grown roots. It was as if her hands were made to mend broken objects.

“At your age, you should still have the right to be acting spoiled to others.”

The words she whispered in my ears were like honey to me, giving my mind a sweet numbness. Just like warm milk, she had a sweet, gentle smell. My skin had been missing the warm sensation of human touch.

I just let my muscles relax and leaned against her without using any strength at all.

I considered myself as being strong-armed into this. This was an irresistible warmth. It was completely different worlds, inside and outside of her embrace.

My eyes felt a little hot. The back of my throat hurt as well – it was hot and painful.

“……Eliza-sama? Are you crying?”

I was breaking down. At the same time that lukewarm water accumulated in my eyes and started spilling over, Mrs. Hortensia’s hands rubbed my back.

“–Please stop.”

Even so, I still couldn’t allow myself to just keep sobbing shamefully like this.

“Please let go of me, Mrs. Hortensia.”

At the same time as I said that, I pushed against her shoulders with my hands. Her look was one of slight surprise, then it changed to what I understood as pity.

My heart was pounding. The feeling in my chest was so intense like it would burst at any moment.

I covered my eyes with my sleeves, and stumbled backwards. Mrs. Hortensia didn't try to hold on to me. When I lightly sat down with my back against my desk, I finally felt a strange sense of relief.

"……Please go ahead to the dining hall. I'll come along shortly."

I heard Mrs. Hortensia sighing gently.

"I shall do as you say. But, please, never forget what I just said."

With that final comment, she left only the sound of her footsteps behind. All strength left my body and I collapsed where I was sitting.

My hands were trembling. I was shivering in fear at something other than that sweet temptation.

Just why did I reject Mrs. Hortensia's words just now, I wonder.

These contradictory feelings of mine made me want to cry again, and I kept desperately grinding my teeth. Still, in the back of my head, I kept telling myself that it was just fine like this.

Chapter 96
Running away to my neighbors

“Eliza-sama, feed those horses over there as well, will you?”

“Got it, I’m on it.”

Children about my age are running about, pouring horse fodder into buckets. I had also joined these children, having added a large amount of horse fodder into a bucket I was now carrying, heading for the group of horses they indicated to me.

The bucket is heavy, and the horses move about freely, so if I don’t act fast I won’t know which horses are the ones I’m supposed to feed. Although it’s winter, this is still work that will make you sweat. However, quite unexpectedly, this is quite enjoyable, even fun.

“My lord, are you okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

As I nodded to Teo who came to see how I was doing, I must have really looked just like a child to him. With a wry smile, he left without saying anything else.

Ratoka, Earl Terejia, and Mrs. Hortensia had each in succession shaken me badly inside, so now internally I was a mess, as if a storm had just passed through me.

Although it’s a little pathetic to tell anyone, but truth be told, I can’t take any more mental shakeups right now. Especially if someone else is like Mrs. Hortensia, and tries to treat me simply as a child, I’m terribly afraid that something within me will collapse and break down.

Right now I’m feeling afraid of everyone living at the Mansion of Golden Hills. This phobia of trusting others has made even me realize that I’m currently a little mentally unstable. I’m also a little surprised at this little bit of immaturity inside of me.

That's why – I decided to escape from there. Or in other words, I became a runaway of sorts.

I absolutely can't bring myself to ignore my work. That's why, I only ran away to my neighbors' tents, the new citizens that are currently passing their first winter on the nearby hills. In the morning I'll still return to the mansion to do my work, but I only sort out and work on the documents with highest priority and importance, and leave promptly at noon. I'm actually only half a runaway.

Originally during winter, my time during afternoons wasn't spent on work anyways, it was my time to practice martial arts and train with the army, so it's no problem to only work this much every day. After I'm done training at the barracks each day, I don't return to my room at the mansion, and come back to the tents instead.

Of course, I'm just escaping reality. I realize this quite fully.

But even so, if the environment around me changes, some other things will change as well. It greatly reduces the chances of meeting someone I don't want to deal with, such as Mrs. Hortensia and Ratoka. Hopefully this gives me a chance for my emotions to settle down. Well, time should solve all problems, including ones such as my age and my feelings.

"Eliza-sama, have you finished over there?"

When I somehow managed to finish feeding all of the horses that I was tasked with feeding, a girl about my age called out to me.

It's been almost two weeks since I started living with the Shiru tribe. I've been staying at the tent with only children, the same one as when I made my inspection before.

"Ahh, it's done."

"Then that's all for today. Let's go get something to eat together."

She grinned and held on to my hand, as we returned to our tent. When I first came here, I kept getting lost among all the tents that looked the same to me, so now the kids here have acquired a habit of having someone lead me by my hand through the tents so that I don't get lost.

“Here, wipe yourself with this towel. If you’re all sweaty you’ll catch a cold, so make sure to wipe properly, okay?”

“I know. I’ll be alright.”

The children in the tent basically treat me as a “newcomer.” The children find it amusing to help take care of me as I’m not used to life among the Shiru tribe.

The older children aside, even the younger children behave as if they’re my older brothers and sisters, it’s quite interesting. It’s quite a fresh feeling to be taken care of for once, instead of having to take charge of others.

With no worries, no cares, I really have this feeling of relief.

I’m wearing some clothing typical of the Shiru tribe that was handed down to me. Usually tunics and dalmatics are the clothing most typical of the Jugfena region, and although there’s not much difference in the tailoring, the embroidery has much brighter colors than our region, and there are many animal motifs such as birds and horses rather than plants.

I carefully wiped my entire body. Without her needing to tell me, wiping down sweat properly had been drilled into my bones during my first three months of training at the barracks. While their clothes are a bit different and possibly made from different materials than the clothes I’m used to, I’m already getting used to them.

“Hey hey, what are you going to do today, Eliza-sama?”

“Today…… I have to go train with the army.”

When the sun passes the midday point, Gunther should be arriving soon at the entrance to this simple makeshift village to fetch me.

“Ahh. So much work. Hang in there.”

I nodded at her encouragement, and crawled out of the tent. I was instantly attacked by the cold, biting air. Thanks to heat from a nearby fire, the cold didn’t pierce down to my bones, but it was still cold.

When I covered my nose with my hand as it was hurting from the cold and watching my foggy breath in the air, the girl followed me out of the tent and put a long piece of cloth around my neck. Is this a scarf? Arxia doesn't use this type of clothing.

"Wrap this around your neck properly. It's a serious matter if you get a cold."

"Ahh, s…… My bad."

Sorry, is what I would have usually said, then I remembered that I was with children and changed my phrasing. To them, they only know simple ways to apologize. The first time I said "my apologies" to them, they all tilted their heads at me quizzically.

"You should only say my bad if you really catch a cold. At times like these, you should say thank you."

The girl seemed so proud of herself as she said so, and I laughed slightly. Since when had I forgotten how to do such simple things, I wonder? Just like she said, it's certainly a strange thing to receive a scarf and apologize for it.

"Thank you."

"Mm, such a good child."

The girl grinned widely and caressed my head. I was finally infected by her as well, finding all of this funny, and a smile appeared on my face.

Chapter 97
Snow crystals, part 1

And, anyone up for donating some steam games to me off my wish list for the winter holidays? They're all on sale! Let me know on steam if so, my name there is the same, imperfectluck, same picture of Estelle the orange haired girl as well!

Outside the window, snow is beginning to fall. Although I'm almost done with today's work, the timing is still bad.

I removed the item I was using as a reading stone to hold documents in place, and thought about the work I still had to do while examining the lump of glass in my hand. Beautiful glass like this with few impurities is a luxury item, much more valuable than something like window glass, that's when I suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

"Eliza-sama, what's the matter?"

"Ah…… Nothing. Nothing's the matter, Mrs. Marshan."

I responded to her and nonchalantly placed the reading stone into my sleeve like nothing had happened. Luckily for me, she didn't notice anything.

As always, it's still Mrs. Marshan's job to teach me about my political work. Since there's still much that I haven't learned yet, it's a reassuring thing to know that I can always call for her at any time I need to. She's a talented teacher who has Earl Terejia's recognition, she's skilled in a wide range of different fields, and she has a sharp mind that always has a fast and accurate response for any questions I ask her.

While she did tilt her head quizzically at me when I was busy affixing myself on my reading stone, but she didn't pay it much mind, and returned her attention to the papers she was working on. It seems like she was reading essays written by both Elises. Mrs. Marshan is also in charge of educating all children at the Mansion of Golden Hills.

I returned my line of sight to my own work. I still have a few remaining reports and applications from my army to go over, and I need to rewrite and simplify the most

important documents as well as sign them. Also, in tandem with that, I need to write up purchase orders for what the military needs, and sign those as well.

After all that I need to organize them and submit the documents to Earl Terejia. If there's no problems, the contents of the documents will be carried out. I punched a hole through each documents and strung them together, finally finishing my desk work for today.

"Are you finished?"

Mrs. Marshan relaxedly pulled up the hem of her dress as she came over. Up until now, she's never even once worn the dalmatics and tunics common to the Jugfena region. She always wore a simple, plain one-color dress with a proper collar.

"Yes, there's no problems. How about on your end?"

"I'm finished as well."

While Mrs. Marshan smiled elegantly, suddenly her expression clouded over as she looked at the papers in her hand. One of the two Elises, or maybe both of them, may have bad grades, I wonder.

"Um…… How are the other children you're in charge of teaching doing? Are they properly learning under your guidance?"

"Eh? Uhh…… They're mostly fine."

Maybe it was a little too unexpected for her to hear me asking this question, she seemed to nod absentmindedly at me. However, she continued to remain out of character as she spoke again.

"However, it seems like recently one of them hasn't been taking what I say to heart…… Although that one is still working hard, it seems like as if there are other distractions going on."

"Distractions……"

I recalled Ratoka's face from when we confronted each other on that day. A surprised expression, a worried expression, a bitter expression, a dark expression filled with

anger…… In just a short moment, so many different expressions were expressed across his face.

I wonder if Ratoka was as emotionally fragile as I was right now, if he had been hurt by that day as much as I was.

“As for Elise the viscount’s daughter, it seems that she’s been having seizures quite often lately, and her condition is poor. As for Elise the apprentice, maybe she’s been worrying about her.”

“……I’ve heard about this as well.”

This is also a story that hurts to hear. Even though I had told Ratoka that I would go and visit Elise, all I’ve done instead is run away from the mansion.

Even though Mrs. Marshan almost certainly doesn’t know about the argument between me and Ratoka, it seems like she’s detected something from my eyes. But in the end, I couldn’t say anything, and lowered my eyes to avoid her gaze.

She probably wants to say let’s do something about it. If not that, she probably wants to ask what happened. But, she didn’t approach the topic at all.

Mrs. Marshan is my governess. Among all the servants, only the governess will end up leaving for another household once her work here is finished. That’s why she never tries to have anything to do with any problem that residents of the Mansion of Golden Hills may encounter. The more people that are living here, the more obvious this has become.

That’s why I deeply feel the irony of how I feel the safest next to her out of all the residents here.

“W, welcome back, Eliza-sama!!”

“I’m back.”

On days that I don’t have to participate in military training, I’ll return to the new citizens’ makeshift tent village to have lunch, and do the work that’s given to me here, before returning again to the mansion for martial arts training.

“Eliza-sama, don’t you get tired from work?”

“It’s started to snow, aren’t you cold?”

“She’s gotten wet from the snow! Take her to warm up by the stove!”

As I entered the tent, I was suddenly surrounded by children. While still busy chattering, one of them took me by my hand and led me to the stove in the center of the tent.

“Ahh, I’m fine. I rode Rashiok here today.”

“Rashiok, he’s Eliza’s friend, the scaled flying wolf dragunia, right?”

At Rashiok’s name, the children suddenly all got into a commotion. I did talk a little about Rashiok before with them, it seems that they remember.

“Yes. In Arxia, we call him a wolf dragon, or a draconis.”

“Is he still here?”

“Yes, he’s still here. He’s waiting outside the tent.”

Apparently the children seemed to be interested in the wolf dragon, and they cheered as I pointed to the tent’s entrance.

“I want to see it!”

“Exactly what I was thinking. It’s cold outside, can we have him come in?”

“Yeah yeah!”

Their eyes that were shining with curiosity, as well as their bright smiles made my chest feel slightly fuzzy and warm. How direct they can be is so dazzling, as well as enviable.

It’s a way of thinking that I can’t have for myself. Even Ratoka who had a twisted childhood growing up, or the sickly Elise, seem so far away to me, sparkling in the distance.

Claudia’s image overlapped with their appearance. She’s a girl that’s so direct in everything that it’s almost unbelievable she’s also a noble girl.

Then, I finally realized it. When Claudia first came to my domain, I didn't know how to deal with her. At first, I was always exhausted because of the way she acted.

In retrospect, that might have simply been me feeling a twisted kind of envy. I can never be like these children, or be like Claudia.

I truly believe that it was a good thing for me, leaving the mansion.

I envy them. However, I'm not like them, and now I can honestly admit to myself that I can't become like them.

Knowing myself clearly, this is definitely a requirement for me to be able to solve my own twistedness.

Chapter 98
Snow crystals, part 2

I called Rashiok into the tent, and the children were all agog in amazement, but also excited as they surrounded him.

“-Wow!”

“It’s okay, he’s just like a horse or a sheep, he’s docile as long as you don’t do anything bad to him.”

I smiled wryly at the overwhelming excitement coming from the children at seeing a real live draconis for the first time, while I stayed by Rashiok’s side and stroked his nose. This is also the first time that Rashiok’s ever been surrounded by such a large number of children like this, but he just took it all in stride although he seemed a bit confused.

“Eliza-sama, is it alright to touch him?”

“Since Rashiok has scales instead of fur, you have to pet him gently.”

“O, ok.”

Several of the older children, gingerly began to start touching Rashiok gently in turn. They made sure to be extra careful.

“Wow, his scales are glistening.”

“This is completely different from a horse!”

Maybe they all now believe that Rashiok isn’t any danger to them, the other children began to reach their hands out to pet Rashiok as well. Since they’ve been dealing with livestock ever since they were born, it only took them a little while to get used to Rashiok. The older children have already petted Rashiok without incident, so the rest of them relaxed unconsciously as well.

After that, they observed Rashiok even more closely with great interest, and some of them seemed to really enjoy the feeling of stroking Rashiok's scales, while some of them stood off to the side after looking, with an expression of great satisfaction on their faces.

I tightly grasped the reading stone in my pocket, and called out to some of the children who had finished with their interest in Rashiok.

"Hey, do you guys know what shape snow is?"

"Eh? Snow's shape?"

I couldn't help but feel a little excited inside when I saw all of them having blank looks on their faces. All of them confirmed to me that they didn't know the answer. Some of them asked if it was similar to grains of earth.

"So you haven't seen it, eh."

"But how do you look at it? They're too small, and look like grains."

"I brought a secret tool with me today."

And after saying so, I brought my hand out and opened my fingers. Calling it something like a secret tool, I tried my best to contain the laughter I was feeling inside, and I could feel my cheek muscles twitching as I held it in.

"What is this? Wow. It looks like ice."

"That's not it. Doesn't this look like glass?"

"Hey, for some reason Eliza-sama's hand seems a little weird."

"Yeah. It looks bigger than usual…… Ah, maybe this is what you can see snow with?"

As I nodded to the child who seemed to understand what this was for, the children's eyes began to sparkle with the light of curiosity.

"I want to see snow!"

"Yeah, I want to see as well. Shall we go outside?"

The children all nodded to each other, and each of them began to tightly wrap their scarves around themselves. I thought that this might take them a while, but some of the girls that really enjoyed helping others had everyone's scarves wound up around them in the blink of an eye.

After they prepared themselves against the cold and everyone exited the tent, even though it shouldn't be that late yet, the sky had already gotten quite dark and covered in snow clouds. Although it's slightly dim, the snow piled up on the ground seems bright in comparison.

This time, the children all surrounded me. I laughed a little as I remembered the way they had just surrounded Rashiok earlier, and I held out my hands to accept some snowflakes onto my mittens.

Then, on top of the snowflakes on my mittens, I placed my reading stone. Well then, is the crystallization of snow in this world a hexagonal flower shape just like my original world, I wonder?

Looking into the lump of glass on my hand, I saw a beautiful hexagonal flower, just like how I imagined.

"I can see it!"

As I held my hand out to the children, they looked at it with great interest, then suddenly there was a huge uptick in their excitement levels.

"Wow! It's pretty!"

"What is this?"

As the children raised their voices and made a commotion, I could see some adults peeking out of the tents nearby in confusion.

"Well, snow is incredible. It looks like a flower."

There was an expression of wonder on her face another girl commented, and I felt joy in my heart as well. As I expected, it looked like a flower.

"Let me see, let me see! ……Oh, it's true. Is this what snow is shaped like? Amazing."

A man who was watching from another tent came over and looked into the reading stone, and agreed with the earlier girl's comment as he patted her head and praised her. Ahh, that's right. Patting someone's head while praising them will make them feel better.

I remembered back to when I was having Ratoka work for me, we never even touched each other. Children should be praised more often and receive more affection, I realize my mistake now. As he patted some other children on the head as well, he put his hand down and looked at me in a bit of confusion on what to do. He seemed like he was hesitating on what to say, but then he returned his line of sight to the other children.

"……Don't catch a cold out here now."

And with a gentle chuckle, he returned to his tent. While I silently watched him leave, someone suddenly patted my head from behind.

"Eliza-sama, you're incredible."

And with that, it was like a floodgate was opened and all the children came rushing over to pat me on the head as well. I'm being pushed around on all sides, I feel like a piece of food they're fighting over.

"Hey, it's about time to eat!"

When one of the children who had stayed with Rashiok called out to us, the children filled the entire area with cheers. Like always, someone was holding my hand and guiding me, but today there's so many kids around me that I can't even tell who's holding on to me. They're everywhere around me, and their warmth is much stronger than that of my mittens.

"-Ah. Everyone being together, it's so warm."

Someone noticed this fact and said it out loud, and it was decided from then on that the children would move together in great clumps like this from now on.

Chapter 99
Exiled prince

Life was peaceful as I spent time with the Shiru tribe children. It's said that only during times like these when one's heart is tranquil that one can explore their true inner self.

Spending all this time with children my own age, I can now objectively observe my own strangeness. No, maybe I should say instead that I was forced to deal with my own immaturity and anxiety, even if I didn't want to.

I'll admit it to myself. My spirit is still immature. As the days passed by, I felt like I was actually more immature than the Shiru tribe children. I was born as and have been living as Eliza to my current age of eight years old without having matured at all over this time. This may be because of the memories I've inherited about my past life by some sort of mistake, making me into a fake adult.

Definitely, my sense of reasoning came with my memories. It's a fact that I used my memories to establish my own personality, since Eliza's original personality hadn't been established yet.

However, these are still just memories that another girl experienced before, it doesn't feel like a personal experience. I'm going to separate myself from her will and her emotions. If I don't do this, there's no way that my spirit will grow and mature.

And so within my ugly, twisted inner self, confusion was scattering about inside me.

Ratoka treats me as an adult and his guardian. Earl Terejia gives me all the responsibilities of an adult. My heart remains too immature as of yet to respond to them.

Also, there's Mrs. Hortensia who tries to treat me like a child. If I take her gently offered hand, I would feel like I'd be shirking all my responsibilities. It would mean that I'd stop relying on my own strength alone. I definitely won't forgive myself for my own sins.

For someone who doesn't even know herself, how can I accurately place trust in others? Whether it's running away from the painful memory of Kamil's death, or

placing a false sense of trust in my previous memories, all of this is simply me acting shamefully.

For me to have only realized all of this now, just how foolish can I be.

It's thanks to these children that I can now laugh at and recognize my own foolishness. They know that I'm the domain lord. However, they also know that I'm still a child as well, and gently remind me of that fact.

……Well, while I'm accepting all of this, it's still taking some time for all of my emotions to sort themselves out.

I stayed with those children on that snow-covered hill for two full months. Finally the skies are beginning to clear up, and winter should be ending soon. This year is almost over.

During a rare break when the weather was completely clear, a messenger pigeon came from the royal capital.

"It's an announcement from the royal family."

Earl Terejia's face was drained of all its color and his hands were shaking as he handed the message to me. It was indeed stamped with the royal emblem.

I haven't seen Earl Terejia or experienced such a painfully heavy atmosphere since the last time we were all together in Ratoka's room, and I adjusted my shirt's collar, trying to forget about that time.

"What did the king say in it?"

When I inquired about the message, Earl Terejia found it unusually difficult to speak. Normally his eyes filled with wisdom and suspicion would be peering over the contents of the letter. Almost as if he wanted to make absolutely sure of what was written there and to check its veracity.

He kept me waiting for quite a while, but he finally answered in a much quieter voice than usual.

"……It's been decided that Prince Albert's going to enter a monastery."

……Huh?

The sound of creaky furniture seemed to fill the entirety of Earl Terejia's office. I only started noticing the sound after what seemed like an endless amount of deafening silence.

"Unbelievable, could that really be?"

I couldn't help but speak what the Earl was probably thinking already. It's only natural. All I could think about was how unbelievable this was.

"Does this mean that Prince Albert's being exiled from the royal family?"

"……That is indeed what it means if he becomes a monk."

Ridiculous. How could such a ridiculous thing happen? And why now of all times. Just losing the position of crown prince was already incitement enough for Planates before, and now this happens.

And on top of all that, just why is he getting exiled from the royal family. Such a thing, it's almost as if –

"Could the royal family and the Ar Xia Church be hoping for a war?"

When I muttered those words out in a daze, Earl Terejia's eyebrow immediately arched upwards.

"Be careful what you say."

I realized what I had just said, and I apologized for my misconduct. Even if it's Earl Terejia, there are things I can't say.

Ever since the time of the Arxia Kingdom's previous incarnation, the Sacred Holy Lawful Kingdom of Arxia, the Arxia Kingdom's power has only been used to protect followers of the Xia religion. War only means defensive wars. Even threatening or provoking other countries, and declaring war, our kingdom finds this unacceptable.

“Well, I meant to say that this will probably become a situation. By making Prince Albert completely ineligible to inherit the throne, this is dangerously pushing Planates, or I should say the Rindarl Union, into becoming even more hostile.”

The voice that ended coming out of my own throat sounded terribly cold.

Well, it’s only to be expected. If Planates becomes an enemy country as well, as part of the eastern border defense line, Kaldia would be greatly affected.

If war breaks out, I hardly have enough soldiers I can mobilize. I’d have to conscript the citizens into the army and onto the battlefield. It’s hard for the Kaldia army who’s already low on troops to recruit enough soldiers, so conscription is the only method.

Are my citizens going to have to fight? For such unclear reasons? Am I going to have to force them onto the battlefield, even though I had decided to compensate for my family’s sins to them?

“Calm down. Those in the royal court will probably be able to persuade the king. As one would expect, since nobles are in charge of their citizens, this is something they cannot ignore. Just like you.”

Thanks to the earl’s coaxing, I was able to calm down, at least on the surface. I just nodded back to him reflexively.

……However, inside me dissatisfaction and anxiety were swirling about like a tornado.

Chapter 100
Stars yet unseen (Side Story)

The oldest memory I could recall, was traveling in a desert somewhere. Behind my father's cart, I was being held in my mother's chest as the golden ground and the blue sky traveled past me so quickly.

"Alright, Kamil. Come with your mother."

As soon as we returned to her home country of Arxia, mother made me join the temple. I thought that I would always be walking behind her, but why did it turn out like this……

In the unfamiliar chalk buildings, my mother who walked around with a lordly manner, seemed like a stranger to me.

"Welcome back, Iris-sama."

The women here were clad in pure white as if for a funeral, and they all bowed their heads towards mother as she passed by, I thought it was strange.

"Mother, where's this?"

I couldn't help but become anxious, and I tugged on mother's sleeves as she walked in front of me. I've begun to grow much faster recently, and I was almost as tall as my mother already who was short among women.

"What is it, Kamil?"

The voice that responded to me, had no warmth to it at all, I wondered if this really was mother's voice after all.

"Um…… Where are we?"

“This is Shanak Temple. The origin of the gods…… The god Misorua’s castle. My home…… And from today onwards, yours as well.”

Mother’s words came out like she was singing, and I couldn’t even understand half of them. This is going to be my home? But the stories I had heard from father about his home while we were traveling, hadn’t mentioned anything about temples at all.

Father had saved money since he was young, and he was finally able to construct a large mansion. I had heard about energetic servants that would work happily for him. There’s no way that he could have been talking about those lifeless seeming women I passed by just earlier.

“……Where’s father?”

And why is it that, father didn’t come back together with us? Last time I saw father, he had been on his way to a trade where he was selling the other party goods for a grand dinner. We should have been sleeping on the carts tonight like usual, and returned home tomorrow together.

“……”

Without even the slightest sign of a smile on her face, my mother ignored my question. At this time, I was extremely confused. My mother in front of me seemed like a completely different person, and the pure white building surrounding me without even a single window felt like it was suffocating me.

I know absolutely nothing. Even though that had been the norm during our travels, why is it making me so uneasy now.

“That man who had no holy power, had no right to ever step foot in this sacred temple.”

“Eh……?”

I don’t, quite understand. That man, could she possibly mean father? With the current conversation, it didn’t seem like she could be talking about someone else, but I can’t believe that mother would refer to father like that.

“……Kamil. You’re my son. Your power shall be devoted to Misorua.”

I had been born while my merchant father was traveling around various countries. Father had taught me how to be a merchant, and before I realized it, I had always thought that would be my course in life.

Mother had taught various skills and knowledge to me as well, and once again, before I realized it, learning became natural to me as well.

“Now, Kamil. Do as I teach you.”

Mother whispered something in my ear as she indicated at the pale white neck of a woman. The woman who was tied up in mother’s restraints, wasn’t even able to cry out in fear and her face was ash white.

Mother placed her hand on my shoulder. I emptied my mind as much as I possibly could, and swung down the short sword in my right hand without any excess movements.

Without wavering, the sword cut off the woman’s head. Since I knew that if I pulled on the sword that blood would splash, I let go of the sword just like that.

“Wonderful. As expected of my child.”

– Amazing, well done. As expected of my son.

Mother’s laughter as she seemed so happy, overlapped with my memory of father’s voice. I felt like fatigue was piling up on me, and I shook off mother’s hand on my shoulder. Recently, I feel like it’s annoying whenever she tries to talk to me, and I have nothing I even want to say to my mother.

“Misorua will surely be pleased as well.”

I know nothing about stuff like that. Unlike my mother, in my mind I spat on it.

“If you would like to leave this place, won’t you come with me?”

I felt extremely lazy. Because it was too annoying to turn my head, even though it was rude I only looked in his direction. Even though he was old, his posture indicated that he was vigorous in his old age. I could instantly tell at a glance that he was different from all the lifeless people in the temple. I had been exceedingly bored until this man suddenly arrived, and now some curiosity has finally returned to me.

"……Oi you, who are you?"

Since the man hadn't introduced himself, I eventually asked him.

"My name is Sigmund Teresia. I'm a noble."

"Ah…… a noble, eh. As expected."

To my confident statement, he lifted his eyebrows quizzically. As a noble, maybe he's protesting my complete lack of manners.

Right now, I don't care about anything. Even if I'm not being courteous to him, please, go ahead and have me flogged or execute me or do whatever you like, is what I thought.

One month ago, I killed my mother.

I had gotten so tired of her existence. Unbelievably, I'd managed to poison her food with the poisons she had taught to me. But I didn't really think that I'd succeed. I guess mother had never expected that her own son would use her own techniques to kill her.

And two months ago, father had died.

One year ago mother had taken me and left father because father had fallen down so far that it was too miserable to look at. As a major merchant who had done whatever he liked, hanging out with rotten nobles and traveling to other countries, his life had become quite depraved.

But in the end, I heard that he was executed for poisoning some nobles somewhere.

Poisoning, eh. Even using the same method, I am indeed my father's son after all. My mother had changed so much, that I had my suspicions.

“I’ll say it again. If you would like to leave this place, come with me.”

The old man informed me in an adamant voice. I had taken a minute to look back on the events of this past year. Living here every day in this chalk white temple with no warmth and no beauty, had sapped my spirit. Just like my mother who was from here.

Compared to those lifeless shrine maidens that I had thought were so strange when I first arrived, there was almost no difference between them and me now who might as well be a dead person.

If I remain here, I’ll probably die just like this. Probably, just like my parents. That was all I was certain of.

“……Got it. I’ll go with you.”

That was my answer, and he nodded firmly.

Chapter 101
Remnants of the Artolas Kingdom

Today's lunch was pancakes, pumpkin stew, and goat yogurt.

Arxia's never had fermented dairy products before. The first time I ate them here I felt like I was eating something extremely "valuable," but I got used to them after eating them every other day here. Rye is ground into flour and provides batter for the pancakes, and they have a rather plain taste to them. I'm really fond of all this food because none of this type of cuisine can be found in Arxia. If only sugar could be added to this pumpkin stew as well, I'm sure it would gain a delectable sweetness.

During the hustle and bustle of lunchtime, the children around me got to chatting about the schedule for this afternoon.

"Hey hey, did you know that some of our parents are going over to teach the army how to take care of their horses today?"

"Ehh, even I know how to take care of horses!"

"According to Eliza-sama, people in Kaldia don't raise horses very often. Just like the farmers' children."

The farmers' children that they're referring to, are the orphaned children left behind by the refugees. Since the farmers' children have far different lifestyles and work habits from the nomad children, they live in separate tents, as under the current simple tent system that everyone here lives in, it's impossible for them to live together. While the thought that the farmers' children would probably need to know about horses for their lifestyles popped into my mind, the Shiru children all nodded in agreement with each other.

Well, anyways.

"It's not the same at all. The Kaldia army is King Eliza's warriors."

Hearing this, one of the children sitting right behind me sharply raised his voice.

“Those who can’t even become warriors are of a lower class, don’t group them together!”

“Really, are you still going on about that, Athrun?”

The other children all seemed to be tired about whatever this topic was and fell silent as the kid glared around at everyone.

The kid named Athrun was a sullen boy with blue hair who was now looking downwards with a surly expression. While there’s a fleck of shadow in his eyes, there’s still an intense will emanating from his silver-blue irises. He’s one of those that usually doesn’t hang out with me, so I didn’t recognize him. I see, so his name is Athrun.

“By the way, although Athrun’s mother is from the Shiru tribe’s Jugar clan, his father was a farmer.”

The girl sitting next to me explained this to me in a small voice, probably because she noticed my attention was on Athrun. She snuck a surreptitious look at Athrun, then continued whispering to me hesitantly.

“When we started fighting with Densel, Athrun’s father had wanted to become a Jugar clan warrior. But, we only allow those of Shiru heritage to become warriors. So in the end, his father wasn’t allowed to participate in battle, and both his parents were killed by Densel at the refugee camp……”

“……I see.”

Well, I definitely think he has quite a sad backstory.

Among the Shiru tribe, there are clear distinctions made between warriors and non-warriors. Those that are made into warriors are given 2 horses each from the Shiru tribe’s common property, and they also receive training in the spear and bow ever since childhood. Although the requirements to become a warrior differ slightly from clan to clan within the Shiru tribe, one thing they all have in common is that they only allow boys from the Shiru tribe to become warriors.

The Jugar clan is a patriarchal clan. Since Athrun’s father wasn’t of Shiru heritage, he wouldn’t be able to become a Shiru warrior no matter how much he wanted to become one.

Now I understand the basics of Athrun's situation, but there's still one thing I'm worried about. The girl who had just told me about Athrun was about to return to eating her meal, but I interrupted her to ask a question.

"……He said 'lower class' earlier, what exactly does that mean?"

From the flow of the conversation – I guessed that it probably had to do with outsiders to the Shiru tribe, the farmers. However, I don't feel that there's such a large gap between the nomads and the farmers to make such a distinction.

In fact, since they're going to move to Kaldia and live here from now on, the Shiru tribe is going to have to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and take up an agricultural one. They don't have the luxury of discriminating based on backgrounds against the farmers.

"Ahh…… Um. In the past, the Shiru tribe's warriors were always considered the 'King's Spears,' the protectors of their chosen king, so it's more glory and honor than the farmers, that's what it is, I think."

Although it seemed like the girl herself didn't really understand her own explanation too well, I understood her explanation about "lower class" very clearly.

The "King's Spears" is a term from the former Artolas Kingdom, they represent the nobles, or ruling class of Artolan society. Meaning, social statuses have carried over from Artolas even after its destruction by Densel.

I put down my bowl of pumpkin soup and stood up. From the edge of my vision, I saw the girl who was just talking to me blink in surprise. I didn't pay her any mind, and I walked up to Athrun.

Since I had suddenly stood up all by myself, of course all the other children gathered their attention on me. Since Athrun was still looking down at the ground, he was the only one that didn't notice me, until I walked directly in front of him.

"Athrun."

At my voice, he snapped his head up. There was great surprise in his silver-blue eyes as he looked at me.

"……What?"

“I happened to hear part of what you were talking about just earlier. What does ‘lower class’ mean?”

All Athrun could do was stand there and nod hesitantly. He seemed to have a confused expression, as if he himself didn’t know why he wasn’t able to answer me.

“I never want to hear you using that term again. The Shiru tribe is now considered to be citizens of Arxia first and foremost, and no longer citizens of Artolas. In Arxia, the Shiru tribe is no different from commoners. All commoners have no distinctions from each other, and are only below the king of Arxia and then the nobility.”

I strongly emphasized the part that there was still someone above the Shiru tribe in rank, while there was no longer anyone below their rank. Although I still wonder if he really understood why I was remonstrating him, he did mutter “I got it” in the end while making a﹀ shape with his lips.

Chapter 102
The reason for quarreling

It seems that without me realizing it, the stories about me showing the shape of snowflakes and letting everyone at the Shiru children's tents meet Rashiok have been heard by the farmers' children. Well, I probably should have realized that it's impossible to stop children from gossiping, and it's fine, anyways.

Come to think of it though, recently children have been sticking to me so much with me as the center of attention that it's like I always have a flock of them following me around everywhere, so I have been thinking about setting some boundaries.

"The Shiru children are hogging Eliza-sama! We want to play with her as well!!"

"Eliza-sama's living in our tent! There's nothing wrong with anything!"

"It's unfair that only you guys get to play with the draconis!"

"Even if you say so, none of you came over to become friends with Eliza-sama until now!"

"Why haven't you guys ever called for us!? You're just hogging Eliza-sama! Isn't it more fun to play with everyone!?"

"It's not like I'm the only one with Eliza-sama, so how can I be hogging her! Besides, Eliza-sama isn't a toy!!"

A Shiru girl and a farmer boy were struggling to pull me in their direction from opposite sides, having an argument. Well, simply speaking, this is a children's quarrel. Judging from their comments, it seems that the children are getting a little overly fond of me.

Maybe I've done a bad thing. From their point of view, they might not want to let go of me when I have to leave them. But still, being tightly packed in by dozens of children every day, it's an indescribable feeling and it's causing me to break down. It's, a bit crushing.

“Then, it’ll be great if Eliza-sama can stay in our tent starting from today!”

“Stop saying such silly things, Reka! Didn’t the clan leaders decide where Eliza-sama would be staying?”

The farmer boy holding on to me by wrapping his arms around my stomach behind me seems to be a boy named Reka who speaks with a bit of a countryside accent. Since I haven’t interacted with the farmer children in the other tents at all, I don’t know him at all. The other girl who’s pulling me is a Shiru girl named Tira that’s currently in front of me with her arms around my neck; she’s usually in charge of helping take care of me. Although they’re bickering, it’s more like friendly banter, so I think they actually get along pretty well with each other. However, why are they getting so heated up with me in the middle?

Is this where I should step in and tell them to stop arguing over me? I just tried to lose myself in thinking and ignoring reality in front of me, but I soon regretted it when my vision began to darken.

I finally felt an icy sensation in my head, along with a painful throbbing sensation. Urk, my neck, my stomach, they hurt so much from being tugged on.

Ahh, am I going to die here? Dying of suffocation thanks to a girl who’s only one or two years older than me pulling on my neck, or will I be crushed to death, or choked to death……

“Oi, you guys had better cut it out already! Reka, Tira! Eliza-sama’s turning pale.”

At that moment, a boy cut through the wall of children surrounding me, making me view him almost like a hero descending from the sky in the nick of time. He peeled both Reka and Tira’s arms off of me, and knuckled both of them on the head. He’s about the same height as Tira, and is shaking his silvery-blue hair. – Oh my, this guy’s definitely familiar.

“……, Athrun?”

When I muttered the name I learned the other day, he instantly turned his head towards me. On his face was a look of surprised innocence, shock that I remembered his name.

“You…… remember my name?”

“Of course. Rather than that, thank you for helping me. It was getting a little painful.”

“It was probably a lot more than painful. You were turning dreadfully pale.”

I just looked directly into his look of surprise, and shrugged. It was indeed painful enough that I had prepared for death. Now that I look closer at him he smiled a slight smile which was somehow a bit mesmerizing, and then he gingerly started pulling me by my sleeve. When I noticed what he was doing, Athrun was getting angry with and scolding Tira who had calmed down and looked like she was apologetic, as well as a boy who’s exactly my height and a little shorter than Tira.

Well, this boy seems to be the one from earlier called Reka. While his eyes were darting in every direction nervously, he apologized to me together with Tira.

“I’m really sorry, Eliza-sama……”

“I definitely won’t do this again, Eliza-sama……”

With Tira and Reka’s apologies, the surrounding children seem to have regained their senses as well, and they all looked a little guilty as if they had done something wrong.

Well, now that some of their eyes are watering up, erm, how to say it, now I’m starting to feel like I’m the one who’s guilty of doing something bad in reverse. Well, to begin with, it’s really because of my lack of thought in not stopping them.

“N, no…… I’m sorry as well to everyone. Even though I was showing off some rare things, it was unfair of me to not call the children from the other tents as well.”

I remembered Reka’s words from the argument just earlier, and I lowered my head in apology and self-reflection as well. If someone with a lot of new and interesting toys just made friends with a lot of other people but not with you, well, of course that would make you feel left out.

The main causers of the quarrel in the first place, Reka and Tira, as well as Athrun looked at each other with looks of incomprehension as if they couldn’t understand why I was apologizing as well. And when they looked at me again, Tira stuck her tongue out at me mischievously, while Athrun had a wry smile and Reka seemed to be overjoyed with a big smile on his face.

“The next time I come up with something fun, I’ll invite you guys along as well. I’ll talk to Teo and ask if I can stay in the farmer children’s tents as well. Will that be alright with you?”

While Reka was looking overjoyed again as expected, he also turned around to look at all the other farmer children and nodded at them – the ones that were complaining it was unfair – then he turned back to me and replied “that’s great!” It seems that although Reka is slightly short, he’s probably one of the leaders among the farmer children.

“I never would have expected Eliza-sama to apologize to us, but anyways if Eliza-sama wants to come play with us, that’s totally fine. We’ll make sure to get along with the Shiru children.”

As Reka grinned widely, Tira apologized as well to him as a leader among the Shiru children, and they made up at the end with a hug. Is this what making up with each other is supposed to be like, I wonder.

Both of them had also lowered their heads when Athrun came to arbitrate between them. Just the other day there had still been some class struggles between them left behind from the time of the now defunct Artolas Kingdom, but it seems that these divisions weren’t deeply ingrained into them yet and that they’re children that listen to reason. Well, I could only smile wryly as I’m still a little older than they are mentally even though I’m roughly the same age as Tira and the others on the outside.

“……Reka. Um, can you stop using the term, ‘Shiru children?’ For all of us, the Shiru tribe, or lower class, none of that exists anymore. All of us are now Arxians, and have become citizens of Kaldia.”

Athrun turned around and said that to Reka with a complicated expression on his face. It looked just like his expression from the other day. Did he understand my meaning, is he agreeing with me, is he carrying out my will?

“……Mmm. I got it, I won’t say that term anymore.”

I wonder if Reka was there as well on that day a few days ago, Reka took a glance at me then nodded joyfully.

Chapter 103
Army reorganization

In this last month of winter, the snow is finally beginning to clear up little by little. There's still a little while left until my eighth birthday's celebration though, as the custom here is to celebrate it a bit after my actual birthday has passed.

"Teo, how are things?"

I was asking Teo to tell me the results of training the Kaldia army for three months on how to handle horses like the Shiru tribe does. With a serious expression, he checked each of the army's formations, examining how they moved, commanding them by raising his voice and using hand gestures.

"Agil and Calvin's squads have excellent results. They have quick responses to commands, and their horses are orderly. There's also no problems with Gunther's squad. However, Locks and Renon's squads are still a bit lacking. They need to get more used to horses."

The members of Locks and Renon's squads that he pointed out nodded in response, while stopping to catch their breaths. These two squads are composed solely of new recruits that have entered the army earlier this year in spring, so their horse handling is conspicuously much more unskilled than the other squads. Their training period as apprentice soldiers has just ended in fall, which is when they started training to become cavalry soldiers, so it can't be helped.

Anyways, today's training is now over. I dismissed the soldiers, and dismounted my horse as well. Teo came up to me looking like he was thinking about something. He was also thoughtful enough to offer me a towel to wipe my sweat off with. While doing so, he also spoke his mind.

"……My lord, I have a proposal."

"Hold on a minute. We also have something to propose to our lord."

What's going on, before I could even reply, another voice cut in from the side. When I looked to see who it was, Gunther, along with Calvin and Agil, were all heading over to speak with me.

"Got it, I'll listen to both proposals. Summarize them for me."

I'll listen to both proposals, then make a decision based on my best judgment. Teo and Gunther seem to have decided on who would go first based just on eye contact, and Teo gave his proposal first.

"Well then. My recommendation is that the entire Kaldia army should be converted into cavalry troops."

It's a simple proposal. His reason is most likely the difference in skill level between the cavalry squads and the other half of the Kaldia army – the infantry squads. As a new type of unit, I put the best soldiers into it. The soldiers that were judged to have abilities necessary for battling on horseback were incorporated into the cavalry squads, and as the domain lord I participate in and supervise their training every day. However, this has caused both the average skill level and morale of the remaining infantry troops to drop as they weren't picked.

In the first place, Arxia treats cavalry soldiers and infantry soldiers differently. Cavalry troops have stronger attack power and mobility, and since they also need special training in horse handling, they usually obtain higher ranks than infantry troops. In the royal army there's also the title of knight, which can then lead to noble peerage.

"……And Gunther's proposal?"

"My proposal is, could you just let me be an infantry squad captain instead?"

Uh, oh. I somehow managed to stop myself from making any sounds of surprise. Teo and Gunther were now glaring at each other. Well, it's only natural, their proposals completely conflict with each other.

"Gunther, is that really fine?"

More surprisingly, Gunther is asking to step down from the position of cavalry squad captain and become an infantry squad captain, which is basically like a demotion. Before creating cavalry squads, due to my father's reign of tyranny causing bandits to

run rampant and the army to become disorganized, the Kaldia army lacked a formal army rank system. As for the army's leader, I had just put Gunther in charge before as he was the most skilled and obvious choice.

Although Gunther wants to be the infantry squad captain, the Kaldia army technically doesn't have this position currently. So if he becomes an infantry squad captain instead of a cavalry squad captain, his rank will technically go down and he would no longer be considered the leader of the army.

"Ahh. I'm more used to fighting on my feet. You can just have Agil and Calvin lead the cavalry squads. Calvin's also the longest-serving soldier as well as the oldest in the army, the other soldiers really believe in him."

I do know that Agil has been constantly acting as Gunther's adjutant before, but I haven't paid as much attention to the older soldier Calvin up until now. When I observe him closely, as a soldier – not to mention a former bandit – he has quite a calm atmosphere about him as our eyes met.

"Then, you think that the two of them should become commanders?"

Since even everyone in my army gathered together is still less people than one division of an actual army, with so few people it's simple to do ranks. At the top is me, the domain lord, and under me are a few commanders. Beneath the commanders are squad captains, and their adjutants. After that there's only regular soldiers and apprentice soldiers in training. Since I'm now taking on the role of their leader, I have a different relationship with the regular soldiers and apprentice soldiers.

"No, I'm saying the three of us should concurrently serve as commanders and squad captains in the army."

"I won't allow that. The roles of commanders and squad captains are fundamentally different. The commander is the one who gives orders, while the squad captain leads soldiers to carry out those orders. Doing both simultaneously isn't possible."

I furrowed my eyebrows and immediately rejected this idea of his. Commanders are usually in the back of the army, while squad captains have to lead from the front, it's incompatible. In the first place, if a commander is in the front lines and gets engaged in combat and can't give orders, the system of command would break down. Then the whole meaning of having army ranks in the first place would be lost.

I know that this is a good timing to reorganize the Kaldia army's system of command. I already informed Gunther about the message a while back from the king and how it was likely that relations would worsen with the neighboring countries. Both of us agreed that we should prepare for the possibility of upcoming battles.

It's been just a little over two years since I finished my military training in the barracks myself. I know that they're no longer leading unruly lives like when they were bandits, they're now used to living in an orderly and disciplined fashion, they carry and act out all my orders, and they have the realization that they're part of the military now.

However, as for making them into more of an actual army, the blunt reality is that there aren't enough soldiers, nor do they have enough experience and education. The only person in the army with an education is Claudia, who's serving both as my bodyguard and is in charge of dealing with all military documents, it's obvious that there's not enough people with the ability to do this work.

When I looked at Gunther again after thinking about how to organize the army all this time to myself, he had a much calmer expression than I would have expected of him considering I flatly rejected his idea. Maybe he knew from the start that I would probably reject it.

"In that case, we don't need commanders until the size of our army gets a bit larger. The three of us can serve as squad captains. Just like before, my lord can be the commander of the entire army. After all, we don't have that many soldiers. At any rate, none of the soldiers are leader material other than the three of us. If such a guy joins the army, you can consider making him a commander after giving him some experience."

"……Well, this sounds reasonable."

In order for such a leader type to join the army, I need to put more effort into recruitment. I also reminded myself mentally to give Claudia an official army position soon. I took a glance at Teo, making another mental note to think about how to integrate the Shiru warriors into the Kaldia army system of command. And, I still need to take care of his proposal as well.

"I don't know if I have all the details, but Gunther wants to lead infantry still, right? In that case, consider my proposal unnecessary."

Since I nodded and said Gunther's proposal was reasonable, it seems that Teo is maturely withdrawing his proposal. Since Teo is still technically an outsider to the Kaldia army, this is also a reasonable action by him.

"No, your proposal was useful as well. Thank you, Teomer. Gunther, wait a little while on reorganizing the army. I'll think on it."

I don't really have the knowledge necessary to do something like reorganizing the army all by myself. When I said that I'll think on it, I really meant that I'll discuss it with Earl Terejia. Gunther probably knows this as well, and he didn't have any objections.

Before the snow thaws in spring, I'm going to have a thorough new system of command in place, and I also want to increase the number of volunteers joining the army as much as possible.

Chapter 104
Meeting

I'm now completely accustomed to a lifestyle of moving back and forth between the Mansion of Golden Hills and the new citizens' simple makeshift village, and I was just thinking about hurrying the construction of the domain lord's mansion in the center of Kaldia at the end of winter.

"Eta…… Elle…… Eri……"

I had just finished my work and was on my way back to the tents from the mansion when I started to hear a voice coming from above me.

What's this? I looked up at the window above me suspiciously, and I saw sparkling golden blonde hair framed by the blue sky.

"Eli…… Eliza-dono!!"

"……Yes, what is it?"

I somehow managed to swallow my sigh, and responded to her. It's been a long time since I've felt this familiar feeling of not knowing how to deal with her.

Of course, this voice belonged to Claudia. The strange words I heard earlier must have been her mangled attempts to get my name right.

"It's been so long since I last saw you! I think it's been over two months!"

Claudia seemed to be excited to see me as she grinned widely and stepped onto the windowsill.

"That's dangerous, Claud-"

Before I could finish saying Claudia-dono, I was interrupted, because the person herself was ignoring my warning and was hanging out the window. Of course, Claudia is preparing to jump from a second story window.

I held my breath. It felt like my heart was going to stop beating.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

And with that, she jumped and landed with soft, lithe catlike movements, and stood there grinning at me with an idiotic expression on her face.

I’m unable to close my wide-open mouth. Just what is she. She’s just impossible. Please get out of this otome game world and back in the shonen manga you belong to. Although, I would honestly be very troubled if she wasn’t here by my side.

This sight was just too shocking for me, so much so that I was trembling all over. Even though I know it’s bad manners, I couldn’t help but vent by shouting at her.

“JUST WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, JUMPING DOWN FROM THE SECOND FLOOR!”

“Uwa!?”

Maybe Claudia’s ears are extra sensitive, she grabbed them really tight after I shouted suddenly at her. Her sky colored eyes were looking at me wide and round with surprise, but I continued my words with a strong force behind them.

“Please stop doing these things outside the realm of common sense. I thought that my heart was going to stop.”

“Eliza-dono……”

With a blank expression, Claudia muttered my name. Then, she seemed to get happy about something, an innocent, delighted expression lit up her face. Ahh, she really looks like a young child when she’s smiling like this. She’s too pure.

“Got it, I swear to never do it again. I didn’t think that you would be that worried about me!”

“Hah?”

What’s this about me being worried for her?

Some words I never would have expected to hear from her came out of her mouth, and this time it was my turn to have a silly expression on my face.

“Weren’t you worried that I would injure myself?”

The very atmosphere around us seemed to lighten as Claudia laughed happily. I tried to come up with some sort of response, but I just couldn’t think of anything to say to Claudia.

“Umm, that’s…… Just what exactly did I mean……”

I have a helpless feeling of wanting to surrender. Claudia was nodding to herself assuredly, saying “yes, that must be it” while striking her palm with her fist. She’s really in a world of her own…… It’s been so long since I’ve been tired like this. It feels like I’m dealing with an incomprehensible opponent.

“There’s a request from Elise-dono.”

I didn’t pay attention to what she said at all. I had a blank look of not knowing what was going on, but Claudia grabbed my wrist without minding that at all.

What’s she doing?

“Ok, let’s get going!”

Where to?

By the time I finally realized what it was that Claudia had said, she already brought me to the room where Elise was recuperating at.

“Ah, Eliza-sama.”

Elise seemed to be simply pleased to see me, but Ratoka who was there as well dressed in maid attire froze at the sight of me. Even though I also felt this was a very uncomfortable situation, for the time being I’ll focus on the noble girl Elise first and put everything else out of my mind.

“It’s been a long time, Elise-sama. I apologize for not coming to see you for so long.”

Despite having some free time for myself since the beginning of winter, I do feel really guilty as I’ve been avoiding this place intentionally.

“No, don’t worry about it. Eliza-sama is the domain lord and must be busy with all the work. Besides, didn’t you send ‘Elise’ to accompany me in your stead? Just for that, you have my deepest gratitude.”

“That’s fine if that’s the case then. I heard that you’ve been having some more seizures recently, how are you feeling now?”

Elise slowly took her gaze off of me to look outside her window, and showed a gentle, lonely expression. It made me a bit anxious, and it also made my heart tighten up in pain.

“I…… still am unable to go outside yet. But it’s okay, it’s still not as bad as before I came here.”

“Elise-dono……”

I suddenly got a flash of inspiration and wondered if this mild-mannered noble girl would have fun playing with the Shiru children. Even though she can’t run around like they can, it might bring her some comfort just to hear about their experiences and daily life.

……It might be a good idea to think about who from the Shiru children I want to invite. I still need to talk with Earl Terejia, but on top of taking care of Elise, it’s my duty to help her regain her health any way I can.

As I started mentally listing candidates in my mind, Elise began to talk about the fun times she had lately with Ratoka and her maid Maya. Since this is what she typically will always talks about, I definitely think that I can give my idea a try.

“If me sending ‘Elise’ over to you has helped Elise-sama to have even a little more fun, then that’s a great thing.”

“Yes. I’ve had so much fun. Thank you very much.”

At Elise’s innocent, charming smile, once again her purity gave my heart a terrible blow.

Chapter 105
Rope making

"My lord wants to choose some children to go to the mansion to become playmates? ……Honestly, I'm a little lost, what's all this about?"

Teo furrowed his eyebrows as he weaved some ropes on the floor. His face said that he didn't understand what was going on.

I already talked with Earl Terejia a bit about finding some playmates for Elise, and he had no problems with it, so now I'm asking Teo.

"I suppose it can be a little confusing, but simply speaking, I want some kids to come over to the mansion to be friends with a girl that's staying there."

"My lord can't accompany her? That's why you need some other children to be her friends?"

It's exactly as Teo says. If only I could do it myself. However……

"I'm unable to go there very often. Also, there's someone there that I find meeting awkward……"

As I thought about Ratoka, I felt a bitter taste in my mouth. I put him with Elise because I didn't have anywhere else to leave him and it was a fact that I needed someone to help take care of Elise, but that still doesn't change the fact that I myself have stayed far away from Elise.

The main reason for the chasm between us, Ratoka saying I was using him as a substitute for Kamil, is still piercing and hurting my heart even now. Seeing Ratoka again, it felt like my heart was being mangled.

Kamil, my citizens, the nameless gravestone, me…… I can't explain it well, but I think that Ratoka is currently a living embodiment of my traumas.

He looks so similar to me. He's a victim of my father's persecution, which also caused his mother to go insane. Into the emptiness that Kamil left behind, did I really slowly

put him there. All of these feelings were gathering up into me and shaping into disgust and guilt.

Even now, I still can't forget that time when he threw a rock at me.

"……Honestly speaking, I don't have anyone truly close to me that I can trust now."

I've gone off topic due to my emotions interfering too much with my thoughts. Thinking on how to fix my accidental revealing of my inner self, I decided to change the topic to a plan that Earl Terejia brought up the last time I spoke to him about playmates for Elise.

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Teo tilted his head. His expression says that he can't keep up with this sudden change of topic.

"I need more personnel, and right now there's not even any candidates. Not only is it me, Earl Terejia is also quite isolated as a noble, so I can't count on him for this either."

Kamil was the only one being educated to support me in the future, but he's no longer here. Claudia's useless at everything other than being a bodyguard, while Mrs. Marshan's age is too far apart from mine.

"……Ahh, so that's what it is. Meaning, having some playmates enter the mansion, they're also candidates for becoming your closest aides in the future."

Teo managed on his own to infer the connections based on what I said so far. It's very helpful that he's so quick to understand.

"Living at the mansion will probably be for the long term. After all, Earl Terejia was the one who came up with this idea to help me find future candidates to assist me."

Elise needs some playmates to keep her company, and I also need to raise some candidates to become my closest aides in the future, this is two birds with one stone. Well, this isn't a bad thing for anyone.

With the exception of their battle prowess, objectively speaking my new citizens are still much weaker in other areas than Kaldia's original inhabitants. Regardless of the

fact that my own original citizens aren't really involved in making decisions in Kaldia, the new citizens will probably strongly feel like newcomers themselves.

However, things will greatly change if they provide several of the lord's closest aides. The domain lord's existence still has an incredibly huge influence on the citizens.

"……I have to talk with the other chiefs before I can give you permission. In short, I can allow it as the leader, but you still need to ask the children in question themselves if they want to go to the mansion."

"That's fine."

It's unavoidable that people will dislike being ordered by their domain lord. After all, I'm asking children to become playmates for a noble guest of mine. It would be easier if I needed some adults to do a job, but since I need children, I've decided that it's better to choose someone that will probably get along well with Elise.

At any rate, they wouldn't be living at this mansion all the time anyways. When winter's over, I intend to return to the village under development with the new citizens, and after that it would be nice if I could come back to visit my summer mansion again on occasion if I have the free time.

As for raising close aides, this isn't something that can be rushed, so there's no hurry.

"And, who specifically do you have in mind?"

"Tira."

"That was an instant reply."

"At the tents, she went out of her way to take good care of me. ……Her assistance was incredibly helpful. As she's both good at taking care of others and explaining things well, I think she'll be perfect as a noble girl's playmate."

She's been very patient with me who entered their lives so suddenly. And she helped me so much. When I think about it, my chest feels warm, and also a little clogged up.

"Got it. I'll talk with the other chiefs about this tomorrow."

"I'll leave it up to you."

After our conversation finished, Teo went right back to making his ropes. Since I didn't have anything else planned and there was only a little time left until dinner, I watched in interest as Teo made ropes as I've never seen this process before.

While Kaldia citizens also know how to make ropes, I've never seen them during the process. Right now I'm really curious how it's done.

Several minutes passed in silence as I watched Teo work on his ropes, then he finally turned his attention to me again.

"……What are you doing?"

"Watching you make ropes."

"Ahh…… How about I teach you how it's done?"

He didn't say that being watched made it difficult for him to work. No wait, even if he doesn't mind, it's not like I really want to learn or anything.

"For future reference, sure."

Teo seemed to send me a warm look as he nodded and moved next to me. What exactly is that look supposed to be for?

Chapter 106
What do people call this?

Snow has mostly stopped falling, and the sun is starting to show itself more often through the clouds, spring is almost here. Vivid yellow flowers began blooming in places where the accumulated snow was melting, warm winds were now blowing down the Amon Nor mountains, and the melted snow also caused some flooding along the Sera river as the dams weren't completed yet.

"Next year we'll definitely be living over there for winter instead, right?"

"It's difficult to move in winter. I think the adults will definitely complete a dam by this time next year, though."

"Hopefully we can all live in a proper village soon."

From the small hill that my mansion sits on, I can see a fairly wide swath of the flat Kaldia territory. The three children that I decided to pick from the new citizens for Elise's new playmates, Athrun, Tira, and Reka, were looking eastward and chatting with each other. I watched them from behind, and although it may have been unnecessary, I ended up joining their conversation at that point.

"……Some craftsmen from another domain are coming over soon to help us build furniture. The adults will have more work to do then as well."

"Ah, I know about that! Eliza-sama hired them, right?"

"Ahh, err……"

Reka turned around after noticing me and had a big smile. I nodded in embarrassment, but Reka and Tira took both my hands and were jumping up and down in joy.

"I'm really looking forward to it! I wonder if Eliza-sama's new mansion will be finished soon as well?"

Usually Reka talks in a slow drawl as part of his accent, but maybe he's a little overly excited today, his rate of speech has really picked up. Since Tira usually takes such good care of me like an older sister would, I'm more used to her excitement.

"There's still plenty of time for that, I think. Although it's a small mansion, five years time is the standard."

Although I don't want to pour cold water on their hopes, I'll still tell them the truth. Besides, constructing their new village is the number one priority for me, work on the new mansion can be delayed until that's finished.

Reka is clearly pouting now. He's sticking out his lips, and his eyebrows are tightly furrowed.

"Ehh~ Then, it's fine even if we don't finish that dam first. I don't want Eliza-sama to not have a place to spend the winter. Hey, Eliza-sama, we can come back here again for next year's winter."

"Oy, Reka. Don't bother Eliza-sama with your selfish requests."

"Besides, even if we're living here again next year, that doesn't mean that Eliza-sama has to live with us?"

"Aw……"

After being scolded by Athrun and Tira, Reka glumly fell silent. With a wry smile, I reached my hand out to his head, and although he was a little confused at first – I patted him lightly on his hair a few times.

"I'll go and see you guys. As much as I can."

"Really!? It's a promise!"

Children are really so simple, and their emotions change so quickly. Reka was instantly all smiles again, and with the momentum that came with his excitement, he easily jumped back onto his horse.

"I'm going to go back first and help prepare lunch!"

After saying so, Reka rode down the hillside so quickly that I didn't even have time to respond. Athrun, Tira and I could only smile wryly at each other.

Claudia looked quite improper as she was sitting on her desk used for work, swinging her feet. The early spring sunshine was shining down from the window behind her, so I couldn't make out her expression clearly due to the glare.

I was sitting in a chair directly across from her, counting the time pass by in silence. Claudia was the one who had called me over saying she had something to tell me. At least this time she didn't jump down from a second floor window while calling out to me, so I suppose this is better. However, she's been quiet for quite some time now, with her mouth bent into a ෴shape. I don't really know what to say to her in this situation either. For once, she has a thinking face and she's furrowing her eyebrows.

The sound of the water clock indicated that the time just reached noon. Claudia raised her face and looked at me as if she just realized I was sitting here. She still seemed a little confused when she met my gaze, and greeted me hesitantly.

"Eliza……-dono? Er, Elena-dono? No wait, it's Eliza-dono, I think I got it right. Um…… There's something I'd like to ask you."

I want to applaud myself for not getting a sore neck yet, looking directly at her and waiting for all this time. I've been kept waiting for so long, what could this important thing that she has to say to me be?

Come to think of it, Claudia's finally been able to remember my name more accurately as of late. Ahh, I feel slightly dizzy from the mental fatigue of waiting so long……

With a slight sigh in my voice, I replied to Claudia.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Ah…… um. Hopefully you won't be angry at me."

This is really rare, Claudia started in an apologetic manner before her main question.

"This is from quite a while back, about the bandits we caught earlier last year. At that time, why did you do the dirty work personally?"

Claudia was tilting her head, and her golden hair was making soft swishing sounds.

I see, so it's about that. She must know that my emotions are stable now. Probably, she didn't ask me right after that incident out of consideration for me. As always, her intuition is like the wild instinct of an animal, she can detect my emotional state so well.

"There were various reasons. I can't explain it easily – but if I had to say, I think I just wanted to kill him since he deserved to die."

"What about the other bandit? Did he just freeze to death in the dungeon……"

"Ah, probably. I thought it was too bothersome to kill him directly. Him dying just like that without anyone knowing was quite convenient, really."

Claudia nodded silently. She's refraining from commenting further, and she may not agree with me, but she does understand my reasons. Seeing her reaction, a mystery popped up in my mind.

Why was it that I always considered Claudia so useless?

It's something that I've only realized recently myself, but I can be quite selfish. Thanks to my previous life's memories, I want to be treated like an adult, and while I acted as mature as I possibly could, I always relied on other adults, just like a child would.

But when an adult like Mrs. Hortensia came along, and wanted to treat me as a child, and when it seemed like she would spoil me to her utmost extent, I was terrified and my spirit broke down.

That's why – I liked having Kamil around. He was important for me. We were children together, we were fellow humans, we were friends, and I was also his lord, even now, his memories still pierce my heart.

I couldn't trust him, and I sent him away from me, so of course I would feel guilty about his death.

And, Claudia meets the same conditions that Kamil did. She's just as pure as the Shiru children, and she's a person who I'm very grateful to because she accepts me as I am.

So, why is it that I can't see her the same way I saw Kamil? This is an incredible mystery to myself.

"Got it. Sorry to have taken up so much of your time. I probably should have asked you much earlier."

Her confusion just earlier disappeared like it never even existed, and Claudia was back to her cheerful self again. And just like that, she left the room.

Then somehow, I managed to come up with an answer to the mystery in my head.

Perhaps, to me, she's neither an adult nor a child. Also, I probably see the Shiru children the same way.

I still can't decide whether or not I should call her my friend. Even though, I can now tell myself so easily, that Kamil was my friend.

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